



A bird's eye view of Bangladesh's home of cricket, the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, which is packed to the rafters during the Asia Cup final Thursday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Late arrivals and the Shakib hat

SAKEB SUBHAN



It was perhaps a bit of a surprise to see half-empty stands at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium when Bangladesh took the field for arguably their biggest match till date, the Asia Cup final against Pakistan yesterday. The stands did begin to fill up slowly, with the stadium taking on the look of a full house only at the end of Paki-

stan's innings.

It was probably a combination of factors that led to the late arrivals, not just yesterday but throughout the tournament. On each match day, of the 25,435 capacity, 11,554 had been set aside as complimentary tickets to be distributed to players, clubs, divisional sports associations, district sports associations and board members and officers. It has been learnt that some of these tickets, many of which are for seats in the Shaheed Mushtaq Stand, had found their way into the black market. The final falling on a weekday was probably another reason, as was the sapping

heat and humidity of the March afternoon.

"I had office till four, and I made my way to the stadium as fast as possible," said Ruhel, who works at Brac Bank. "And also, the traffic was horrendous, took me an hour to get here."

Late or not, he was where he wanted to be. When asked if he thought Bangladesh could win the final, a nervous smile and an "InshaAllah" was all he could reply with.

Despite the late arrivals the atmosphere in and around the Sher-e-Bangla recalled the heady days of the 2011 World Cup. Crowds of people swarmed in front of each gate, with many already having given up hopes

of getting into the stadium.

"I didn't have tickets," Adeet, a student, said as he was busily looking for a ticket he could scalp from the black market. "I decided to come at the last minute because two of my friends had tickets and I decided to tag along and see if I could get lucky."

The island on the street outside was lined with people sitting and staring at the stadium. Even if they could not get in, they wanted to be part of what could be the greatest day in Bangladesh cricket history. As Umar Gul became the eighth Pakistan wicket to fall, the crowd outside responded to the deafening roar

inside with wild cheers of their own.

Also, as evidence of the wave of euphoria that has gripped the cricket loving public, the pointed party hat that Shakib Al Hasan wore after the victory over Sri Lanka was sported by many at the ground and outside.

"These hats are being sold outside the stadium," said Anis, a university student, as he was entering the stadium. "I saw these hats before, but after I saw Shakib wearing it and the guy outside selling it, I knew I had to have one."

One of the men doing brisk business with the hats on the street, Mohammad Sharif, called it the 'Shakib hat'. "We ordered the hats

and have been doing pretty good business, especially since Tuesday [the day of the match against Sri Lanka]," he said.

Naturally, the overwhelming support was for the Tigers. Shumon Mollah, who charges Tk 15 Tk 20 to paint the Bangladesh flag or names of players on the faces of supporters, did some sly business of his own. "Almost everyone who came to me today wanted the Bangladesh flag or the names of Shakib or Tamin [Iqbal] painted on their faces. About ten, all Pakistanis, wanted the Pakistan flag. I charged them Tk 100 each," Shumon said with a mischievous smile.

Two Runs Too Far?

SHAKIL KASEM

The tension was for many reasons, primary one being locating a venue which has a TV screen showing cricket, any cricket. Tough call in a city where Premier League football reigns supreme.

Chance meeting with Anis A Khan and Ramzul Seraj the previous evening at Bangkok's popular heritage site FOODLAND on soi 5 did throw up a possibility. Incredibly hospitable the two of them being as they are, I was invited for dinner and watch the cricket with them. Catch was they were on the look out for that elusive TV screen as well. Short story short, no dinner, and cricket certainly not as well.

Sukhumvit sois are notorious for being glitzy with neon and gurgling with mischief at the best of times in the evening. Yours truly therefore had to take refuge in trusty Arab owned internet cafe, loud and boisterous African clientele drowning out means of deciphering any informations Cricinfo may have been churning out in timelagged fashion. But, crouched over the screen, in the midst of cacophonous chaos of a multitude of expatriates from several corners of the globe, one actually felt a sense of empathy. Is this how one actually feels in reaching out for news from back where one has come from? For me the need was to know the score of a cricket match, for others it was probably more seriously prosaic and related more to do with aspects of life that had a bearing on friends and family. Any way, united as we were in our single minded quest for knowing all there was to know from back home, my faith and trust in Cricinfo acquired newer heights.

It was not just the outcome of the match, I realised, that was of concern. It was as a temporary Bangladeshi expatriate that I was viewing myself in a foreign land, wanting and willing my country to succeed, a thousand miles away, yet desperate for any existential crumb of comfort that the paid for computer would throw back at me. At a certain point in time, I was convinced we had achieved as a country and a team the status of a respected, and also a dangerous opponent. 236 runs for a final was achievement in itself; it meant therefore we had bowled and fielded well? We had done these and more in the league matches too. So, a thousand miles away, not knowing what the wicket was all about, not giving a damn whether this Pakistani line up had good batters or not, I simply took the easy option; I surmised, not incorrecly I trust, that this young team of ours knew why they were in the final and were out to win it. In a country, where not much seems to be going to plan, here were a band of brothers who brought the country to a standstill, so all could watch in awe how easy it is sometimes to achieve the impossible.

Two runs in the end was what separated the historic from the heroic. Two runs in the end determined the difference between what was, what is and what might have been. But two runs described the countless miles this team has travelled so quickly in the past few months. Let us not delude ourselves into equating this team with our cricket however. This team is on its own, it has found a captain for itself, who carries his weight in the side, and for my money speaks more sense than most other people in the country in positions of consequence. In Shakib and Tamim, the team acquires an aura of combative competence that can take on all comers. Shakib of course is a proven master at such an early age.

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President, PM & Leader of Opposition cheer Tigers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Putting all their busy schedules on hold, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia took time off to cheer the Bangladesh cricket team on in the Asia Cup final against Pakistan at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

The leaders went to the stadium to inspire the Tigers in anticipation of a victory in the final after they created a buzz in tournament with some good performances in their previous matches.

President Zillur Rahman, Jatiya Party chairman and former president HM Ershad, BNP's acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir also enjoyed the



(L) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina enjoys the proceedings of the Asia Cup final between Bangladesh and Pakistan while (R) Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia waves to the fans at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday.



PHOTOS: PMO & STAR

match for a long time.

Ershad went to the stadium before the start of the match while prime minister arrived at the President's Box at 4:30pm, just before the dismissal of Pakistan star Shahid Afridi. President Zillur Rahman also came to the stadium to watch the Bangladesh innings.

Khaleda Zia went to the stadium at around 8:00pm and sat in the hospitality box. Party leaders Sadeque Hossain, Maj Gen (retd) Fazle Elahi Akbar and Maruf Kamal Khan Sohel accompanied her.

Earlier, on Tuesday Sheikh Hasina enjoyed Bangladesh's league match against Sri Lanka at the stadium. But this was Khaleda Zia's first visit to the stadium.

'Public holi-afternoon' Hafeez hails Tigers

STAR SPORT DESK



Yesterday was a different day altogether for the final match of the Asia Cup between Bangladesh and Pakistan here in Bangladesh. Before the tournament started no one would have dared to think of a final between these teams. But as the days progressed, the Tigers portrayed themselves as a much improved bunch and earned their place in the title match just rightfully. They turned the table around to beat world champions India and runners-up Sri Lanka on the way. And suddenly they emerged the favourites, at least for the Bangladeshis.

By reaching the final itself, the Tigers have already created history for themselves. And in anticipation of the final glory, the people of the country enjoyed a 'holiday' to see it all with their own eyes.

School authorities in the city were asked to release their pupils by noon. Office-goers either availed a casual leave or simply bunked. Even the street vendors kept their shops under lock and key to be a part of it. Traffic on the city streets in the afternoon were so thin that no one could imagine how thick it was a few hours ago. This was the case not only in the capital, but elsewhere in the country.

Our Correspondent in Chittagong says, cricket enthusiasts of the port city were glued to television screens leaving their work places as early as 2pm as Bangladesh mesmerised them with a spirited display on the field.

People opted to remain indoors in front of television sets either at their homes or offices. Those who didn't get enough time to get home, chose to queue up in front of electronics shops to enjoy the match. A few unfortunate ones who could not manage to leave work kept themselves updated

through radio or by calling a friend on mobile phone.

Rezaul Karim, driver of a CNG-run auto-rickshaw, stopped driving his vehicle and started to enjoy the match on TV at an electronics showroom. He said, "I am very hopeful today about our win. All of our players are trying their best, especially Shakib and Razzak are doing well in bowling."

Our Staff Correspondent in Khulna reports, the whole of Khulna city was eagerly watching each and every step of the Tigers in the final of Asia Cup against Pakistan.

Normal life virtually came to a halt after 2pm as people of all walks of life remained glued to TV screens to see their team performing excellently in the field. City roads looked almost deserted as people stayed home to watch the final on TV leaving their daily works.

Fans were seen overwhelmed with joy as Bangladesh bowlers and fielders playing their part perfectly to send the Pakistani batsmen back to pavilion.

There was hardly any road in the Khulna city where large number of people didn't assemble to avail a peek at a TV screen in a roadside shop or restaurant.

Shamsun Nahar, owner of a tea stall at Tootpara Central Road in the city said that she had closed her business at 2pm to watch the match.

Our Staff Correspondent in Rajshahi reports, the metropolis turned into a city of celebration with people cheering around, chanting slogans, beating drums, blowing whistles and eye-catching display of fireworks.

People, rich or poor, men or women, boys or girls, many wearing the jersey of Bangladesh cricket team, remained glued to television sets making the city streets wear a deserted look. At the Shaheb Bazar Zero Point, fans gathered in huge numbers in anticipation of a Tigers win, which ultimately wasn't to be.

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SPORTS REPORTER



On paper, no matter how well they played through the tournament, Bangladesh versus Pakistan in the Asia Cup final was a mismatch. But the way Pakistan celebrated after they won the match by the narrowest of margins, two runs, showed exactly how much the win meant to them and the amount of respect they had for Bangladesh as opponents.

Mohammad Hafeez, the Pakistan all-rounder who had a particularly good final scoring 40 with the bat and bowling a crucially economical spell, was very gracious in crediting his opponents for the fight and fortitude they displayed.

"We all should admire the courage showed by Bangladesh in the whole tournament. There were really some magnificent performances by their players. They really had a belief in themselves and we must consider them one of the emerging sides in the world," said Hafeez when asked whether he considered their win a narrow escape.

"You can say somewhere they played better cricket, but we are very lucky to win this tournament and the credit must go to the bowlers, they kept their nerves and they bowled well at the end."

When asked whether Pakistan were happier to be playing Bangladesh instead of Sri Lanka or India, he spoke out in defence of his opponents. "You cannot call them a weak side because they beat the current world champions [India] and the former world champions [Sri Lanka] in the tournament. And even in today's match, they were very much on the winning track. I think they deserve a lot of credit for the way they have adjusted in this tournament and the fighting spirit they have shown."

In all the praise that, deservedly, will come Bangladesh's way, it should not be

forgotten that Pakistan were the best side in the tournament and it was Pakistan who held their nerve for the win. It was their strength that won out over Bangladesh's -- Pakistan's bowling over the home side's chasing.

"This was a pressure game, the one who had the nerves in control will perform better. The Bangladeshi team, they played really well," said Hafeez. "They had all the scenarios they were looking for. In all the matches they were chasing well. We were very sure that the bowlers in the end could win the game. Umar Gul and Aizaz Cheema really bowled well in the end."

It was Pakistan's bowling that made the difference. Apart from Tamim Iqbal and Shakib Al Hasan, none of the Tiger's regular performers in the tournament could dominate the strong Pakistan attack.

And yet, at the halfway stage it seemed like the fairytale would come true for the Bangladeshis, and Pakistan would be consigned to yet another defeat in an Asia Cup final after last having won it in 2000. But Hafeez was confident that the bowlers could do the job.

"I think we were very sure, because our bowlers were in form, that if we could score 225-plus, we can give some tough time to the Bangladeshi players," said Hafeez. "And we all knew that it was a pressure game, and one had to handle the pressure well at the end of the match. They played really well, and it was a great game, we all were witness to that. I think our bowlers at the end did what was required for the team."

It was a special victory for the Pakistan team, considering they have not played at home since 2009 owing to the terror attacks on the touring Sri Lankans, and also because they have had a tough time in ODI cricket of late.

"It was the final everyone wanted to see, both teams could have won till the very last ball, but I think in the end our bowlers handled the pressure better," Hafeez said.