



A goalmouth action from yesterday's Southeast Bank Victory Day Hockey Tournament match between Bangladesh Navy and Bangladesh Police at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium. PHOTO: STAR

WORLD HOCKEY LEAGUE ROUND-2 Bangladesh's hopes of qualifying slim

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh have been pitted against tough opponents in the World Hockey League Round-2 along with India, China, Ireland, Azerbaijan and Fiji as the matches of this group will get underway on February 18 in Indian capital of New Delhi.

Thirteen teams have qualified for this round who will be joined by eight teams -- standing from ninth to 16th in world rankings -- and three hosts nations in the 24-team Round-2.

These teams, split into four groups, will play a round-robin tournament and later the top two teams from each group will advance to the semifinal round where the top eight teams in the world rankings will also join the field.

In Bangladesh's group, India are considered favourites to become champions while either China or Ireland are seen as the side to finish second. Nevertheless,

Bangladesh are holding the fourth position on paper in the group, considering their strength against two other opponents -- Fiji and Azerbaijan.

Though the Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) officials had earlier thought that Bangladesh would have a good chance to qualify for the semifinal round from the group, but they now almost gave up their hopes after seeing the inclusion of China and Ireland in the same group.

"Initially we had been informed by the IHF officials that our group would comprise India, Bangladesh, Fiji and one team from the Middle East, but we recently came to know that China and Ireland would also be part of our group," said BHF general secretary Rahmatullah adding that Bangladesh's chances of advancing to the semifinal round faded due to the inclusion of China and Ireland, who are much better sides than Bangladesh.

Clarke in fitness race

Cricket

AFP, Melbourne

Skipper Michael Clarke is racing the clock to be fit for the Boxing Day Test against Sri Lanka as selectors mull whether Mitchell Johnson or Jackson Bird will be Australia's third pace bowler.

Clarke has been treating a right hamstring strain suffered in Australia's 137-run win over the tourists in last week's first Test at Hobart, while Johnson and Bird were added to the squad for the injured Ben Hilfenhaus.

Selectors have placed Usman Khawaja on standby for Clarke, with vice-captain Shane Watson expected to lead the Australians if the skipper fails in his fitness bid.

Clarke, who has reclaimed the top spot in the latest ICC Test batsman rankings, said last week his scans were "positive" and he was confident of playing.

He has been having an extraordinary season, scoring 1,489 runs at 106.35 and is just 55 runs adrift of Ricky Ponting's Australian record of 1,544 in a calendar year with a potential two innings left in Wednesday's Melbourne Test.

Opinion is divided over the merits of left-armed Johnson and newcomer Bird for the third pace spot alongside Peter Siddle and Mitchell Starc.

Australia's greatest Test wicket-taker Shane Warne has plumped for Bird, who has excelled in the last two Sheffield Shield seasons and is ideally suited to the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

"I think [Bird] will open the bowling on Boxing Day," Warne said.

"I don't think Australia will go with two left-armers. I think Mitchell Starc and Mitchell Johnson both leak runs."

Starc's 24 Test wickets have come at 29.20 while Johnson has taken 196 wickets in his 48 Tests at 31.17.

Bird has built a strong case for selection with 80 wickets in his 14 Sheffield Shield matches for Tasmania at 17.54 and has snared 14 of those in two matches at the MCG at 12.07.

Australia largely dominated Sri Lanka in Hobart with Siddle and Starc leading them to their first win of the home season, after losing to South Africa 1-0 in the recent three-Test series.

11 Tests, going back to 1988 and struggled in the fast bowling department in Hobart, relying on spinner Rangana Herath to take the wickets late in the game.

Herath is expecting vocal support from the large expat Sri Lankan community in Melbourne for the team's first Boxing Day Test at the MCG in 17 years.

"In South Africa last year, [it was] the same scenario," said Herath, who with 60 wickets is this year's most successful Test bowler.

"We lost against South Africa in the first Test and we came back strongly and we did well and we won against South Africa in that Boxing Day Test match."

It will be a special occasion for Sri Lanka's Kumar Sangakkara, who needs 40 more runs in his 115th Test to become the tenth Test batsman to complete 10,000 runs.

"In any player's career, you remember the Test matches you play at Lord's, at MCG, at Cape Town and in Galle," Sangakkara said.

"These are iconic grounds you want to play Test cricket in. I have played 12 to 13 years of Test cricket, but this is my first time here.

"You feel happy, you feel proud to walk out with so many people watching you play. That is the ultimate for any sportsman."

Sangakkara said Sri Lanka had to learn from their mistakes in Hobart, when they lost inside the final hour of play.

Local snippets

FROM PAGE 16

Nur Mohammad, secretary of the Youth and Sports Ministry, will inaugurate the three-day competition which comprises 20 events, said a press release.

National Women's Handball

Exim Bank 23rd National Women's Handball Championship will begin on December 30 at the Shaheed Capt. M Mansur Ali National Handball Stadium and Sultana Kamal Women's Sports Complex.

28 teams, split into eight groups, will take part in the first round and eight group champions will then join last year's semi-finalists -- BJMC, Ansar, Dhaka and Noagaon -- in the second round where 12 teams, split into four groups, will be fight-

Veeru back

FROM PAGE 16

allrounder and Shami, the Bengal seamer, have been rewarded for their consistent performances on the domestic circuit and India A tours. Legspinner Mishra's inclusion in the ODIs was a big surprise.

Though there is not much to choose between Mishra and Piyush Chawla when it comes to leg-spin bowling, Mishra's fielding has been a big weakness. Besides, he has had a prolonged problem of overstepping while bowling.

There are doubts over whether Sehwag will play in the 2015 World Cup. He was dropped for the Asia Cup in March following a poor CB Series in Australia.

SQUADS

T20: Mahendra Singh Dhoni (capt), Gautam Gambhir, Ajinkya Rahane, Yuvraj Singh, Rohit Sharma, Suresh Raina, Virat Kohli, Ravindra Jadeja, R Ashwin, Ashok Dinda, Ishant Sharma, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Parvinder Awana, Piyush Chawla, Ambati Rayudu. ODI: Mahendra Singh Dhoni (capt), Virender Sehwag, Gautam Gambhir, Virat Kohli, Yuvraj Singh, Rohit Sharma, Suresh Raina, Ravindra Jadeja, R Ashwin, Ishant Sharma, Ajinkya Rahane, Ashok Dinda, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Shami Ahmed, Amit Mishra.

BSPA's 4-day

FROM PAGE 16

organisers as well as a blood donation camp will be held at the Handball Stadium while the last and main programme titled "Golden Day" will be held in the afternoon of December 29 at the Shaheed Tajuddin Wooden-floor Stadium.

BSPA president Rana Hasan and general secretary Mostafa Mamun revealed the programmes at a press conference yesterday. The organisation started its journey in 1962.

Dhaka off

FROM PAGE 16

walk-over against Faisal Abdullah.

Bangladesh under the name of Dhaka City was scheduled to play against London City on Sunday night. Some 24 teams, split into six groups, are taking part in the event and 16 teams will qualify for the knockout phase, said a press release.

Tendulkar

FROM PAGE 16

was yet to 'open' the Nehruvian economy."

The master blaster figured on the cover of Time magazine in May this year for the editions in the Indian subcontinent, Singapore and Australia and New Zealand after he completed a century of tons in international cricket.

New Indo-Pak innings!

Cricket

REUTERS, New Delhi

Cricket legend Kapil Dev remembers what it was like playing for his country against India's bitter rival, Pakistan, when he made his international debut in 1978: a bowler was expected to aim at the batsman's body.

"When I played my first series against Pakistan, it did look like a war," India's 1983 World Cup-winning captain said during a recent TV panel discussion. "In our time, we were expected more to harm the Pakistani players than win a match."

Fast-forward to 2012, and India and Pakistan are once again preparing to face off on the cricket field, playing their first series since 2008, when already brittle relations were shattered by the Mumbai attacks.

The fact that the matches are happening at all is widely seen as a sign of the warming atmospherics between the South Asian neighbours, which have fought three wars in their brief independent history and remain deeply mistrustful of each other.

Some 3,000 Pakistani cricket fans will travel to India, benefiting from a more relaxed visa regime that was agreed on earlier this month as part of a series of confidence-building measures. The teams will play five matches across different Indian cities, starting on December 25.

It is the latest round of what is known as "cricket diplomacy" -- a tradition of using the subcontinent's favourite sport to mend relations

that stretch back a quarter of a century and saw their respective prime ministers hold pitch-side talks last year.

"Politically, cricket has always been there to break the ice," said Aamer Naseer, a Pakistani TV sports show host.

Both India and Pakistan are crazy about cricket and emotions run high whenever the two sides meet, usually in stadiums packed to the rafters and resounding with jingoistic slogan-shouting.

"The atmosphere is unparalleled," Omer Ghaznavi, a sports analyst for City FM, a popular Pakistani radio station. "I haven't been to another sporting event where people are so charged up."

Such is the pressure that the Pakistan Cricket Board is sending a psychologist to help the players cope with the tour.

Former Pakistan captain Waqar Younis, alongside Dev at the panel discussion, explained the strain players come under.

"My boys even stopped speaking to each other, such was the pressure," Younis said. "People dub it a war. Well, it's certainly not a war. At the same time, it's not just sports either. It is somewhere in between."

New Delhi and Islamabad have used cricketing occasions to try to make progress on issues that have dogged relations since the two nations won independence from Britain in 1947, especially over the fate of the Kashmir region they both claim.

In 1987, then-Pakistan President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq visited India to watch a cricket match. But the

event was also used to defuse a crisis over troop build-ups on one of the world's most militarised borders, meeting Indian prime minister of the day, Rajiv Gandhi.

In 2005, Pakistan's then-military ruler, Pervez Musharraf, travelled to India to watch a cricket match, but the trip also became a summit with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the two leaders agreed to open up the Kashmir border.

Relations are slowly improving since the attack on India's financial capital in 2008, when Pakistani militants went on a killing spree that left 166 people dead and raised fears of an Indian reprisal against its nuclear-armed neighbour.

India accuses elements of the Pakistani state of collusion in the assault, and of dragging its feet in bringing the planners of the attack to justice, allegations Islamabad strongly denies. Indian authorities hanged the lone surviving gunman of the attack last month.

But festering diplomatic sores are unlikely to overshadow the cricket tour, according to sports historian Boria Majumdar.

Both countries "welcome resumption of cricket ties. They know it's important to play and engage in trade. They know you don't achieve anything by not playing with each other," he said.

"Cricket badly needs an India-Pakistan series. So do the fans," he said.

"Have no illusion, a cricket series can't herald peace between two feuding nations. At the end of the day, it's the responsibility of the political classes."

Sachin calls time on ODIs

FROM PAGE 16

the game on the shoulders of his team-mates.

Tendulkar was two months away from his 37th birthday when he smashed the first-ever double century in the history of one-day internationals, making an unbeaten 200 against South Africa in Gwalior in February, 2010.

It was unclear if he will

continue to play Test cricket, where he has scored a record 15,645 runs in 194 matches at an average of 54.32 with 51 centuries.

Former India skipper Krishnamachari Srikkanth said Tendulkar's records can never be matched.

"I am surprised by his move but he is leaving ODI cricket on a high. I am sure he will want to leave on a

high in Test cricket also. He will be looking forward to a good Test series against Australia," he said.

"His records cannot be surpassed."

Former captain Sourav Ganguly said: "I felt that he might have played on, but it is his decision and I think it is right."

"There was a doubt on whether he would play

ODI cricket or not. But I am not surprised by his decision. He has done what he thought was right."

India off-spinner Harbhajan Singh also paid tribute to the record-breaking batsman.

"Master. 463 matches, 23 yrs, 18426 runs!!!! These numbers no body else will be able to come close to salute salute salute to sachin," he tweeted.

Tendulkar was part of a famed Indian middle order which included Ganguly, Rahul Dravid and Venkatesai Laxman -- all of whom have now retired from all levels of the game.

His announcement on Sunday comes only weeks after Ricky Ponting, second only to Tendulkar in the list of highest run scorers in Test cricket, played his last match for Australia.

Tendulkar is also the star batsman for the Mumbai Indians in the Indian Premier League (IPL), a domestic Twenty20 tournament.



Bangladesh Sports Press Association (BSPA) president Rana Hasan speaks at a press briefing at the Handball Stadium yesterday. PHOTO: COURTESY

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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| ACROSS | DOWN | 21 Leak slowly |
| 1 "— -la-la!" | 1 Vacationing | 22 "Loves me (not)" flower |
| 4 Blue hue | 2 Man-mouse link | 23 Grecian vessels |
| 8 Docket entry | 3 Retreat, as the neck | 25 Spill the beans |
| 12 Part of TGIF | 4 Stretch, off course | 26 Gilligan, notably |
| 13 Sitarist's rendition | 5 Deviates | 27 Stead |
| 14 Fairy tale preposition | 6 Khan title | 28 Historic periods |
| 15 What old soldiers do | 7 Yea canceler | 30 Sad |
| 17 Actress Gilpin | 8 Dome | 33 Rut |
| 18 Sea flock | 9 Pinnacle | 34 Emanation |
| 19 Packaged river | 10 Aching | 36 Giggly sound |
| 20 Missouri of your life? | 11 Oklahoma city | 37 Barber-shop need |
| 22 One-on-one fight | 16 Work units | 38 Geometry calculation |
| 24 Moistens in the morn | 19 Flex | 39 Jock's anti-thesis |
| 25 Clingy crustacean | 20 Probability | 40 Halt |
| 29 Narc's org. | 51 Thither | 42 Swine |
| 30 Sightless | Solution time: 25 mins. | 43 "The — Daba Honey-moon" |
| 31 Melody | LAST TSP SURE | 44 Past |
| 32 Small telescope | AMIR RIB ENOS | 45 Longing |
| 34 On the briny | ROSA OBI PINO | |
| 35 July birthstone | AKT MBO TRIO | |
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| | STRAY HEM IRK | |
| | USER FOR ASEA | |
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CRYPTOQUIP

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Yesterday's Cryptiquip: IF RABBITS HAVE TO TRAVEL SOMEWHERE BY PLANE, I IMAGINE THEY WILL HOP FLIGHTS AT HARE-PORTS.

Today's Cryptiquip Clue: B equals A