

Gold Cup opener in Sylhet, final in Dhaka

SPORTS REPORTER



After burning a lot of midnight oil the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) on Thursday announced the new season will kick-start with the invitational Bangabandhu Gold Cup.

The six-nation invitational football tournament will commence on January 29 at Sylhet with hosts Bangladesh facing Malaysia.

Sylhet, one of two venues, has already won the BFF hearts by attracting a full-house during an international friendly last year.

Country's premier venue Bangabandhu National Stadium will play host to the February 8 final.

"Holding the Bangabandhu Gold Cup has been a dream for us. And despite a lot of difficulties due to tight domestic and international schedules of the invited national teams, we have not only convinced them to take part in the Bangabandhu Gold Cup once, but for five successive years and it is a great pleasure for me and the football federation," said BFF president Kazi Salahuddin after the logo unveiling and groupings at a city hotel.

Holding of the third edition of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup had been limited to discussions for last two years since Salahuddin reclaimed the presidency for a second successive term and it finally came true after frantic activities home and abroad from the BFF boss. The last time the event took place in 1999 featured 12 teams.

"We had completed the groupings of the tournament in Melbourne [during the AFC Congress on January 9] after discussing it with the participating teams," explained Salahuddin.

"I will be happy if Bangladesh play the final, but the reality is that our target is to qualify for the semifinal first and then think of the final," added the BFF boss.

According to the groupings disclosed yesterday, Bangladesh will lead Group A that also includes Sri Lanka.

Group B is comprised of Thailand, Bahrain and Singapore.

Out of the nine games, four, including a semifinal, will take place in Sylhet.

Earlier, chief guest Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith unveiled the logo featuring the face of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Bangladesh national team's interim coach Saiful Bari Titu believes Bangladesh have been placed in an easy group compared to the other group, but they must work hard to reach the semifinals.

"It is always difficult to win international matches whether it is against easy or strong opponents," said Titu. "We have good experience as we played against Sri Lanka recently and we also know about Malaysia, who are considered the favourites in the group. But our target will be to top the group as we want a comparatively easy opponent in the semifinal."

Echoing the sentiments of Titu, captain Mamunul Islam said, "We don't have any alternative but to perform better if we want to play the semifinal, as both Malaysia and Sri Lanka are good teams."



Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith (2nd from R) unveils the logo of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

C'Ron named player of the century

AFP, Lisbon

Triple Ballon d'Or winner Cristiano Ronaldo was hailed as Portugal's player of the century at a gala to celebrate the 100th anniversary of their football federation on Wednesday.

Chelsea coach Jose Mourinho picked up the award as Portuguese coach of the century at a red carpet event at the Estoril casino 10km outside Lisbon.

The Real Madrid star, who scored 60 goals in 61 games in 2014, came out of a vote ahead of Eusebio known as the Black Pearl in the 1960's, and Luis Figo who won the Ballon d'Or in 2000.

Ronaldo himself clinched a third Ballon d'Or on Monday, having previously won the ultimate individual award in football in 2008 and 2013.

Ronaldo ponders comeback

AFP, Fort Lauderdale

Brazilian football legend Ronaldo has hinted he might come out of retirement at age 38 and play some games with the second division North American Soccer League's Fort Lauderdale Strikers.

Ronaldo, who hasn't played professionally since 2011, recently became part-owner of the side which competes in the 11-team league which is part of the feeder system for Major League Soccer (MLS).

The former Real Madrid, Inter Milan and Barcelona star told Sports Illustrated that he plans to get in better shape and might suit up as a reserve player.

"I will try to play some games," he said. "This year I want to train a lot. The last three years I didn't because I was too busy in other stuff."

Spurs stage a fightback

AFP, London



Shane Long scored the winner as Premier League high-flyers Southampton saw off second-tier Ipswich Town 1-0 in their FA Cup third-round replay on Wednesday.

Victory saw the Saints book a fourth-round tie at home to top-flight rivals Crystal Palace -- a side now managed by former Southampton boss Alan Pardew.

Meanwhile Mauricio Pochettino, another ex-Southampton manager, had a night to remember as his Tottenham Hotspur team came from 2-0 down to beat Burnley 4-2 at White Hart Lane to set up another all-top division Cup clash at home to basement club Leicester.

Elsewhere, third-tier Bradford defeated second division Millwall 4-

0 as the Bantams booked a glamour tie away to Premier League leaders Chelsea.

Ipswich, third in the Championship, had done well to hold Southampton, third in the Premier League, to a 1-1 draw at St Mary's and the 1978 FA Cup-winners had an early effort from Stephen Hunt disallowed for offside.

It needed an opportunist strike from Long to give south coast side Southampton, fresh from their morale-boosting win away to Manchester United -- the team they beat to win the 1976 FA Cup final -- on Sunday, the lead in the 19th minute at a windswept Portman Road.

Saints' James Ward-Prowse burst through the middle only to be dispossessed by an excellent sliding tackle from Ipswich's Tommy Smith.

But as the loose ball squirted away to the right of the area, Republic of Ireland striker Long let

fly with a first-time shot that flew inside the near post to give Southampton the lead.

On the stroke of half-time, Southampton -- already missing the influential Morgan Schneiderlin -- saw Victor Wanyama suffer what appeared to be a hamstring injury.

There was a frantic start in north London with three goals inside the opening 10 minutes at White Hart Lane.

Marvin Sordell gave visitors Burnley a third-minute lead when he scored from 16 yards out with a powerful shot following a long ball over the top.

And five minutes later Sean Dyche's side, who held Spurs to a 1-1 draw at Turf Moor, were 2-0 ahead when Ross Wallace's 25-yard effort took a huge deflection off Roberto Soldado and beat the wrong footed Michel Vorm.

But Burnley had little time to enjoy the lead as Spurs, who beat the Claret to win the 1962 FA Cup

final, pulled a goal back.

Andros Townsend's cross was nodded on by Soldado and Paulinho took the ball on his chest before unleashing a half-volley that made it 2-1.

Spurs then levelled on the stroke of half-time when Etienne Capoue seized on a loose ball.

Tottenham then turned the match on its head with two goals in three minutes early in the second half.

Vlad Chiriches headed Tottenham into the lead in the 49th minute after Claret's goalkeeper Tom Heaton came for a corner and got nowhere near the ball.

Three minutes later, Spurs had a two-goal lead when left-back Danny Rose turned in Soldado's cross.

In Yorkshire, Bradford added to the pressure on Millwall manager Ian Holloway, whose side are battling to avoid relegation from the Championship, by going 3-0 up before the interval.

Zia's 5th victory

SPORTS REPORTER

Grand Master Ziaur Rahman posted his fifth victory in the 13th Parsynath Delhi International Open Grandmasters Chess Tournament when he beat Indian IM Chakravarthi Reddy in the ninth round at the Ludlow Castle Sports Complex in New Delhi yesterday.

Zia has now six points from nine matches.

Kukushkin stops del Potro run

AFP, Sydney

Juan Martin del Potro's winning comeback after 10 months out through injury was ended by qualifier Mikhail Kukushkin at the Sydney International on Thursday.

The Argentine defending champion, who spent much of last year recovering from wrist surgery, was knocked out in two tie-breaker sets by the Kazakhstan qualifier, 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/3) in just under two hours.

Del Potro, who beat Sergiy Stakhovsky and top seed Fabio Fognini to reach the quarter-finals after he was awarded a wildcard into the tournament, fought to the end, but found Kukushkin too strong on the day.

Only a handful of tiebreak points separated the two with neither player's serve broken during the match.



Tottenham Hotspur defender Vlad Chiriches (R) celebrates his goal against Burnley during their FA Cup third round replay at White Hart Lane on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Fresh start for Shaqiri

REUTERS, Milan



Xherdan Shaqiri's move to Inter Milan has given the impish Swiss player the chance to relaunch a career which has not quite lived up to its early promise.

Shaqiri could make his Serie A debut at Empoli on Saturday (1700 GMT) following his move from Bayern Munich, where he showed flashes of brilliance during his two-and-a-half year stay but never won a regular place in the team.

Bayern was always seen as a risky move for Shaqiri who showed enormous potential when he made his international debut as a 18-year-old and was a teenager when he was voted Switzerland's Player of the Year in 2011.

After a promising first season when he helped Bayern win the treble under Jupp Heynckes, Kosovo-born Shaqiri fell out of favour under Pep Guardiola and has started just three Bundesliga games this season.

He has now moved to a club, which, like himself, needs a shot in the arm after finish-

ing ninth and fifth in the last two seasons.

"I wasn't completely happy at Bayern," the 23-year-old, who scored a hat-trick against Honduras at the World Cup, told reporters. "I need to play because that's the only way I can show what I'm worth."

"I'm hungry for success and I'll do whatever it takes to win something for this club. I feel really confident about the relationship that's taking shape with the coach and the squad."

Shaqiri said that Inter coach Roberto Mancini had been fundamental in persuading him to make the move.

"I received other offers from England and Germany, but I always knew what I wanted to do," he said. "I spoke with Mancini on the phone, he explained his plans to me and I didn't look back from there."

"The first thing that struck me was the fans who were waiting for me at the airport. It was unique and I'll never forget it."

"It's Mancini's job to decide where I play," he added. "I feel most comfortable as a number 10, where I can roam across the attack and have the chance to both shoot and pass."

Goal in 14 seconds

AFP, Melbourne



Ali Mabkhout scored the Asian Cup's fastest recorded goal after just 14 seconds on Thursday as the UAE reached the quarterfinals alongside

three-time winners Iran. Mabkhout pounced just moments after the kick-off against Bahrain in the quickest strike recorded in the event's 61-year history, to set his team on the way to a 2-1 win.

And Iran's esteemed coach Carlos Queiroz was left purring at Sardar Azmoun's "brilliant" winner in the 1-0 victory over Qatar, comparing him to the best strikers he has worked with.

But beleaguered Jordan boss Ray Wilkins sought solace in his mother's love on a chaotic day off the pitch marked by fresh recriminations over a

bungled dope test which robbed the Englishman of a key player.

High-flying Australia, still missing captain Mile Jedinak through injury, suffered another setback with the news that Aston Villa defender Chris Herd is out of the tournament with an Achilles problem.

UAE grabbed the headlines, however, with striker Mabkhout sparking his side to a victory over Bahrain which kept them on top of Group C on goal difference.

It was his third goal of the Asian Cup after netting a brace in the 4-1 victory over Gulf Cup champions Qatar at the weekend, making him the competition's top scorer. However, UAE needed an own goal from Bahrain captain Mohamed Hasan to take the points.

Not at their best, Iran did enough to scrape past Qatar 1-0 to also make it two wins out of two, Azmoun striking

seven minutes into the second half with a likely contender for goal of the tournament.

"It was a brilliant goal," gushed Iran coach Carlos Queiroz, charged with ending a 39-year title drought. "It was a special moment of the centre-forward, a great turn at the level of some of the best centre-forwards I have worked with in my life."

Praise indeed from the former Real Madrid and Portugal boss, who has worked with some of the game's greats, including world footballer of the year Cristiano Ronaldo.

Azmoun produced a magical turn and finish to seal the three points but Iran's stuttering display sparked an angry reaction from Queiroz in the second half, the Portuguese hurling a water bottle to the ground in disgust at his team's inability to retain possession.

Socceroos lose Herd

AFP, Sydney

Australia's Aston Villa defender Chris Herd has been ruled out of the rest of the Asian Cup with an achilles injury, the team said on Thursday.

The 25-year-old underwent scans and received treatment after going down in training before the Soccerroos face Oman in Sydney.

"It's disappointing for the team and especially for Chris that he is unable to continue in the tournament," coach Ange Postecoglou said.

"It has been determined it is in Chris's best interests that he returns to Aston Villa for rehabilitation to ensure he can get back on the pitch."

Moyes sees red as team lose

AFP, Madrid



David Moyes was sent to the stands as his hopes of a trophy in his first season in charge of Real Sociedad ended with a 3-2 aggregate defeat to Villarreal in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday.

Trailing 1-0 from last week's first leg, Moyes's men's uphill task became even tougher when Giovanni dos Santos teed up Gerard Moreno to fire home the opener on 26 minutes.

Carlos Vela gave the hosts hope just before half-time when he bundled in the rebound from close range after Sergio Asenjo had saved Imanol Agirretxe's headed effort. However, former Barcelona and Tottenham Hotspur forward Dos Santos put the tie beyond any doubt when he put Villarreal back in front 17 minutes from time.

Sevilla set-up a quarter-final meeting with Espanyol thanks to a comfortable 4-0 win over Granada to progress 6-1 on aggregate.

Athletic Bilbao also squeezed into the quarterfinals on away goals despite being beaten 2-0 at home by Celta Vigo.