

SHOWTIME IN SYLHET

Bangabandhu Gold Cup kicks off today

ATIQUÉ ANAM from Sylhet



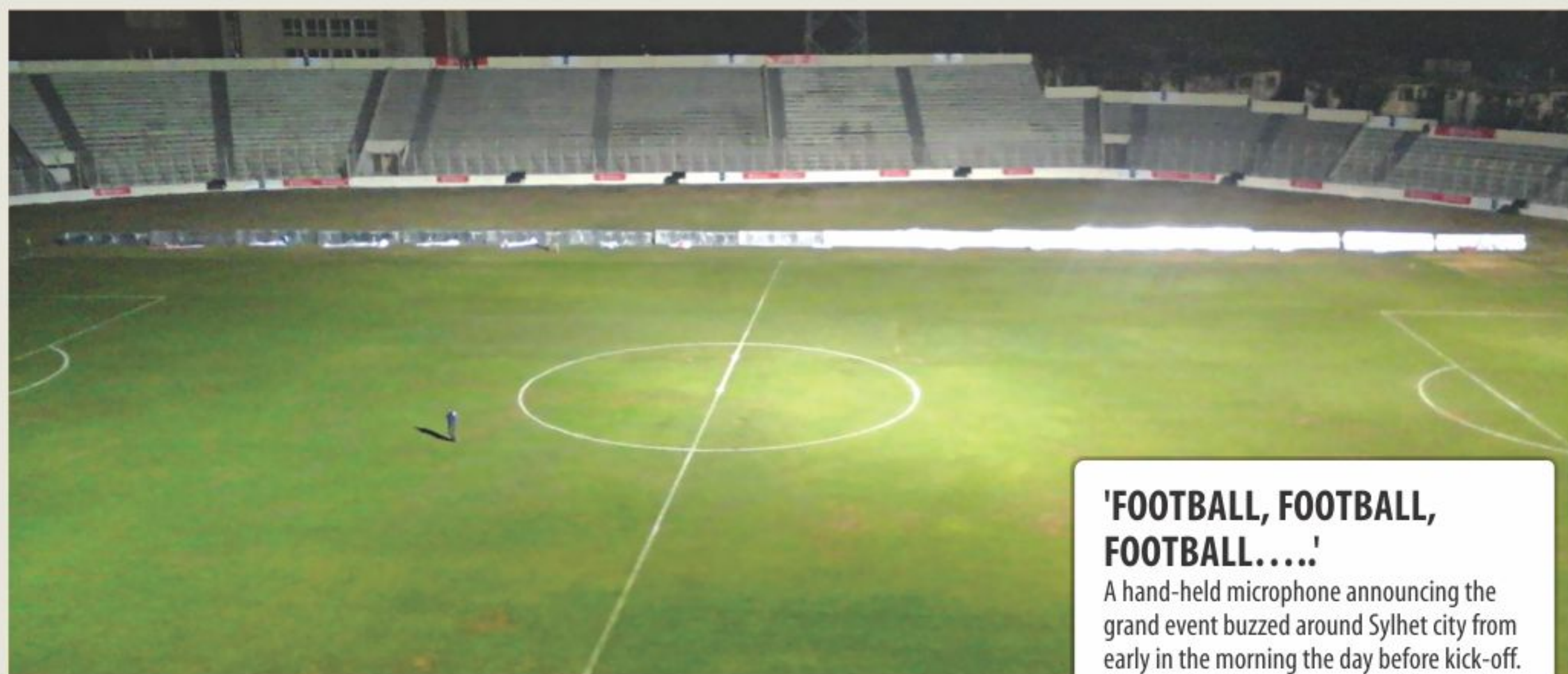
Five months ago on this day, the Bangladesh Football Federation had taken a speculative yet intelligent step towards reinvigorating the fledgling popularity of football in the country. The game's governing body staged an international friendly between Bangladesh U-23 team and their Nepalese counterparts in Sylhet on that day, the first ever international match held outside the capital. It was a test; one to see whether football still held the same charm across the country that it used to decades ago.

The response from the people of Sylhet, who swarmed like bees to the ill-equipped Sylhet District Stadium, came to the game's governing body as a pleasant surprise and a vindication to spread international fixtures beyond the busy capital.

Five months on, the northeastern district, renowned more for its tea gardens and shrines, has been rewarded for its whole-hearted appreciation of the game, by being selected as the co-hosts of the prestigious Bangabandhu Gold Cup 2015. This is the first time that a top-tier international football tournament is being spread beyond Dhaka, even though there was an instance of holding an age-level qualifying tournament of AFC outside of the capital previously. The six-nation invitational tournament kicks off at 5:00pm at the Sylhet District Stadium today where Bangladesh will square off against Malaysia U-23 team in the first Group A fixture.

15 YEARS OF HIBERNATION

The Bangabandhu Gold Cup 2015 is the third edition of the tournament, which was in hibernation for the last 15 years. 1996 and 1999 saw the first two events where twelve teams each participated. Although the first edition featured only club teams, Bangladesh national team participated in the second edition against Olympic teams and age level teams (U-18, U-19) from different countries.



Malaysia Red (U-23) won the inaugural event beating Ujungpadang club of Indonesia 2-1 in the final, while Japan League XI (an assortment of J League players) beat Ghana Olympic team 3-2 in the final of the second edition. But the country coinciding with the receding popularity of the game forced the tournament into exile after the second edition, only to be revived lately.

HOW READY IS THE VENUE?

The Sylhet District Stadium, situated in the busy hub of the city at Kibaribazar, just about avoided a catastrophe on August 29, 2014, when thousands of fans had broken through the gates to watch the Bangladesh-Nepal match, but remained largely well-behaved. However, the organizers are not taking any chances this time around. The Sylhet District Football Association president Mahi Uddin Saleem informed that that there will be police checking at a 300m radius area of the stadium, apart from checking at the entry gates, which have been fortified recently. Apart from the gates, the stadium has undergone some hasty

renovations, most notably in the VIP box and a make-shift press facility. The organizers have hoped that the floodlights, which have had the major share of upgrading, will work properly during the matches. However, the playing surface, the most crucial aspect of the venue, still looks incapable of holding international matches. The pitch is still quite uneven and rolling has taken a heavy toll on the grass.

THE SHOW BEFORE KICK-OFF

The kick-off will be preceded by a brief cultural show, showcasing Sylhet's culture and heritage. The half-hour-long show will feature tribal dance performances as well as performances by popular singers Shuvro Dev and Mila Islam and a rendition of a Shah Abdul Karim song. On a larger scale though, there will be fan festivals on each match day and a giant screen on the Keane Bridge over Surma river will air the matches live for those who will miss out on the opportunity to watch from the venue.

THE UNITING FACTOR

All six teams, four of which are already here, are being provided highest security by the law-enforcement agencies. The Rose

'FOOTBALL, FOOTBALL, FOOTBALL....'

A hand-held microphone announcing the grand event buzzed around Sylhet city from early in the morning the day before kick-off. Decorated with banners and archways at the busy intersections, the city had been warming up to the occasion for quite a while now. A colourful rally set off from the match venue and made rounds through the main streets of the city in the afternoon. The 17,400 tickets for the opening match have been reportedly sold out while those that are still unsold for the four other matches are in high demand. There is an air of expectation among the people, an expectation of watching good football and of watching the home team succeed.

View Hotel, where all the participating teams are boarding, is being provided with round-the-clock security and so are the teams' movements to and from the hotel. The state agencies are making sure no untoward incidents take place, especially since the opening matchday has coincided with a dawn-to-dusk strike here. However, there is nothing to be worried about, according to Zayed Chowdhury, a veteran sports organiser, who has been involved with football and cricket in Sylhet for long. "There are only two uniting factors in our ever-so-divided society," Zayed says. "One is religion and the other is sport."

Beat & win Tk 30 lakh

SPORTS REPORTER from Sylhet



If Bangladesh needed some motivation ahead of today's Bangabandhu Gold Cup opener against Malaysia U-23 team, it came in the form of a declaration of huge cash incentive from Kazi Salahuddin. The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president made a surprise visit to the team's training session at the BFF Academy ground in the afternoon, where he declared that the team would receive Tk 30 lakh as a bonus if they win the opening match.

The declaration came shortly after the team's assistant coach Saiful Bari Titu and skipper Mamunul Islam had stopped just short of terming victory as the only target in the pre-match press conference. Their rhetoric ranged from explaining the progress made over the last year or so to the hope of doing something positive in the tournament. Titu, who explained the tactical aspects and gameplan in the conspicuous absence of head coach Lodewijk de Kruijf - the Dutchman declined to attend the press conference citing tooth-ache but did later conduct the training session - said his team would play the usual 4-3-3 formation and would try to grab the initiative with a strong start.

"After playing a few friendly matches recently, we are in good shape, both mentally and physically. Our target is to make a good start and perform throughout the tournament," said Titu, adding that this Malaysian side's participation in the Singapore League and Queensland League is what makes them respectable opponents.

The only other explicable reason to be not too confident about a victory could be the lack of information about the Malaysia players available to the Bangladesh team management. The Bangladesh think-tank do not have any match footage of this team, which is aged just above 20 on average and feature only three players from the Olympic squad which lost all three of their group matches in the Asian Games last year.

The head coach of the Malaysia team, Mohamed Razip Ismail, tried to shift the pressure away from his young side by saying that Bangladesh are the favourites in this tournament.

"The hosts are the favourites, not only in this match, but also in the tournament. We want to do well in the group stages and if we qualify for the final, that will be a bonus," said Ismail, adding that with four weeks of training, they are taking this tournament as a preparation for the AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers in March.

Away from the rhetorical battle, Bangladesh Skipper Mamunul felt they owed the people of Nepal a good show.

"We will try to play the best football, which we could not do last time around (0-1 defeat against Nepal). Spectators are our biggest strength. If we win, we will win for them," said the 27-year-old midfielder.

2-match ban for Ronaldo

INTERNET

Cristiano Ronaldo will miss Real Madrid's next two games after Spanish football's disciplinary committee decided to review the red card he saw against Córdoba and not consider it violent conduct. Ronaldo was sent off when Real Madrid were desperately looking for a game-winning goal and apologized shortly after the game. His team ultimately earned the three points. Ronaldo will miss Saturday's match against Real Sociedad and next Wednesday's home game against a Sevilla team that will not be easy to beat. Ronaldo will now have a full week to get ready for a derby that could be decisive for this Liga BBVA title.

\$4B transfers in 2014

AFP, Lausanne

The global football transfer market hit a record high in 2014, breaking the \$4 billion barrier for the first time, according to the annual report by FIFA TMS, which monitors all deals.

England provided the biggest investors and Brazilian players were the most sought-after as a total of 13,000 players moved clubs.

English clubs accounted for \$1.17 billion in 2014, which represents more than a quarter of global spending. Spanish clubs received the biggest slice of transfer fees, at \$667 million.

English clubs came next, receiving \$523 million. Brazilian players were the leading targets, accounting for 1,493 moves, worth \$448 million, ahead of players from Argentina, with 801 transfers, England (596) and France (507).

Figo challenges Blatter for FIFA presidency

AFP, London



Former Portugal and Real Madrid winger Luis Figo announced that he is to challenge Sepp Blatter in this year's FIFA presidential election.

"I care about football, so what I'm seeing regarding the image of FIFA - not only now but in the past years - I don't like it," the 42-year-old said in an interview broadcast by CNN.

"If you search FIFA on the internet you see the first word that comes out: scandal - not positive words. It's that we have to change first and try to improve the image of FIFA. Football deserves much better than this."

Figo joins Asian Football Confederation vice-president Prince Ali bin Al Hussein, Dutch football chief Michael van Praag, ex-FIFA executive Jerome Champagne and former France winger David Ginola in the running to unseat Blatter, who will bid for a fifth term in office in the May 29 election.

Figo told CNN he had secured the necessary support from five national football associations, but declined to identify them.

"I've been talking with so many important people in football - players, managers, president of federations - and they all think that something has to be done," added Figo.

"Last year was the World Cup, I was in Brazil and I saw the reaction of all the fans regarding the image of FIFA and I think something has to be changed."

"Change in leadership, governance, transparency and solidarity, so I think it's the moment for that."

As one of the most famous footballers of his generation, Figo is the most high-profile candidate to have launched a bid to succeed Blatter.

The 78-year-old Swiss has been tarnished by accusations of corruption stemming from the bidding process for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, which were awarded to Russia and Qatar respectively.

Chelsea win, but at what Costa?

AGENCIES, London



Branislav Ivanovic's extra-time header sent Chelsea into the League Cup final at Liverpool's expense as the London club edged a breathless semi-final second leg 1-0 on Tuesday.

The Serbian's goal gave Jose Mourinho's side a 2-1 aggregate win, taking them into a March 1 final against either Tottenham Hotspur or Sheffield United.

Chelsea striker Diego Costa is at risk of punishment after twice appearing to stamp on Liverpool players.

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho once again alleged that his team were the victims of a "campaign" in response to questions about Costa.

"I don't know what you understand by 'stamp'," said Mourinho, who has been charged by the FA after claiming Chelsea had been targeted by a "campaign" over accusations of diving.

put me in trouble - but I think this time I cannot be punished to say that there is a campaign on the television with a certain pundit that is saying (alleging) Diego Costa crimes.

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho received a £25,000 fine over similar comments which were made following his side's 1-1 draw at Southampton last month, the Football Association announced on Wednesday.

Mourinho claimed there was a media-driven "campaign" against his team following a spate of diving allegations and said a yellow card shown to Cesc Fabregas for simulation during the game was a "scandal".

"Of course. That's a campaign, that's a clear campaign," he said.

"People, pundits, commentators, coaches from other teams - they react with Chelsea in a way they don't react to other teams. They put lots of pressure on the referee and the referee makes a mistake like this. We lose two points, Fabregas earns a yellow card."

In light of his recent comments a further fine may be imposed and he may even be subject to a touchline ban.

BFF buys 20 tolas of gold

SPORTS REPORTER

Having taken the lesson of counterfeit crests that were given to the heroes of the War of Liberation, the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) is determined to avoid such scam by providing 20 tolas of 24-carat gold in the 22-inch trophy for the champions of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup football tournament, which begins in Sylhet today.

Some members of the gift and prize committee of the tournament already bought the required gold yesterday.

A replica trophy will be put on the field from the first day of the tournament while the runners-up will be given a similar 18-inch trophy which contains 20 tolas of silver.

Real to rename Bernabeu?

THE GUARDIAN



The Santiago Bernabéu stadium will be renamed the Abu Dhabi Bernabéu, according to the Spanish sports newspaper AS.

The report has not been confirmed by Real Madrid, but the president Florentino Pérez was caught on camera admitting to a member of the regional government that the stadium will be called whatever the Abu Dhabi investment group IPIC want it to be called.

Madrid signed a deal with the International Petroleum Investment Company at the end of October 2014. IPIC owns the Spanish petrol company Cepsa and is owned by the emirate. Pérez presented it as an agreement that would enable Madrid to carry out the redevelopment of the Bernabéu.

While figures were not given the deal was understood to be worth €3m a year until Madrid began work, when IPC would pay €20m a year. Madrid have not said that the stadium will be renamed, although Pérez has admitted that it might be given a "surname".

However Pérez was caught talking to Lucia Fijar, in charge of the department for Sport and Education in the Madrid regional government. "We'll call it IPIC Bernabéu or Cepsa Bernabéu," Pérez said.

Now AS reports that the stadium will be called the Abu Dhabi Bernabéu after IPIC was rejected as a name.

Milan CEO tells all in prank call

AFP, Milan

AC Milan CEO Adriano Galliani has been tricked into revealing details about his transfer plans and Inzaghi on radio on Tuesday.

Galliani fell victim to a man who pretended to be president of rival club Sampdoria, Massimo Ferrari.

The prankster quizzed Galliani if Inzaghi would be sacked if Milan lost to Lazio on Tuesday, and he said "No." Galliani was also asked which strikers the club had targeted to shore up their ineffective attack.

"I'm looking for a centre-forward on loan and I will sign Osvaldo or Destro," said Galliani, before asking the fake Ferrero: "Are you planning to loan (Stefano) Okaka out? If so, then I'll be in touch."



Star midfielder Mamunul Islam will have to do something special if Bangladesh are to kick-start their Bangabandhu Gold Cup football campaign against Malaysia at Sylhet today.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED