

OF BASKETS, HOOPS, AND ALLEY-OOPS

NAZIBA BASHER

It is merely a dream for many of us, to be able to wear our national emblem proudly on our chests in a foreign land, to sing our national anthem wearing our hearts on our sleeves, and represent our nation with our talents and skills.

12 girls, very recently, have gotten that opportunity. These 12 girls, who make up our National Women's Basketball team, were a part of the first ever South Asian Basketball Tournament for Women. Even though they have previously played against other international teams, this was the first time they played for the country on a platform so large.

Formed in 2009, the team has gone through many a transformation. The current team includes Zayeema Sarwar, Ridwana Fairuz, Maswiya Iftekhar, Gulnazar Mahbub Monika, Ashreen Mridha, Lami Khandkar, Natasha Kalam (Captain), Lamia Hafiz (Vice Captain), Raysa Habib, Naomi Hossain, Tasfia Fairuz and Rayma Habib.

Their first international game was against a team representing Tripura, India, who had come to Dhaka for a 3-match series. With six months of hard work and training, our Bengal Tigresses won their first series.

On March 2016, the team was flown to Nepal for their biggest tournament away from home - the South Asian Basketball Tournament for Women.

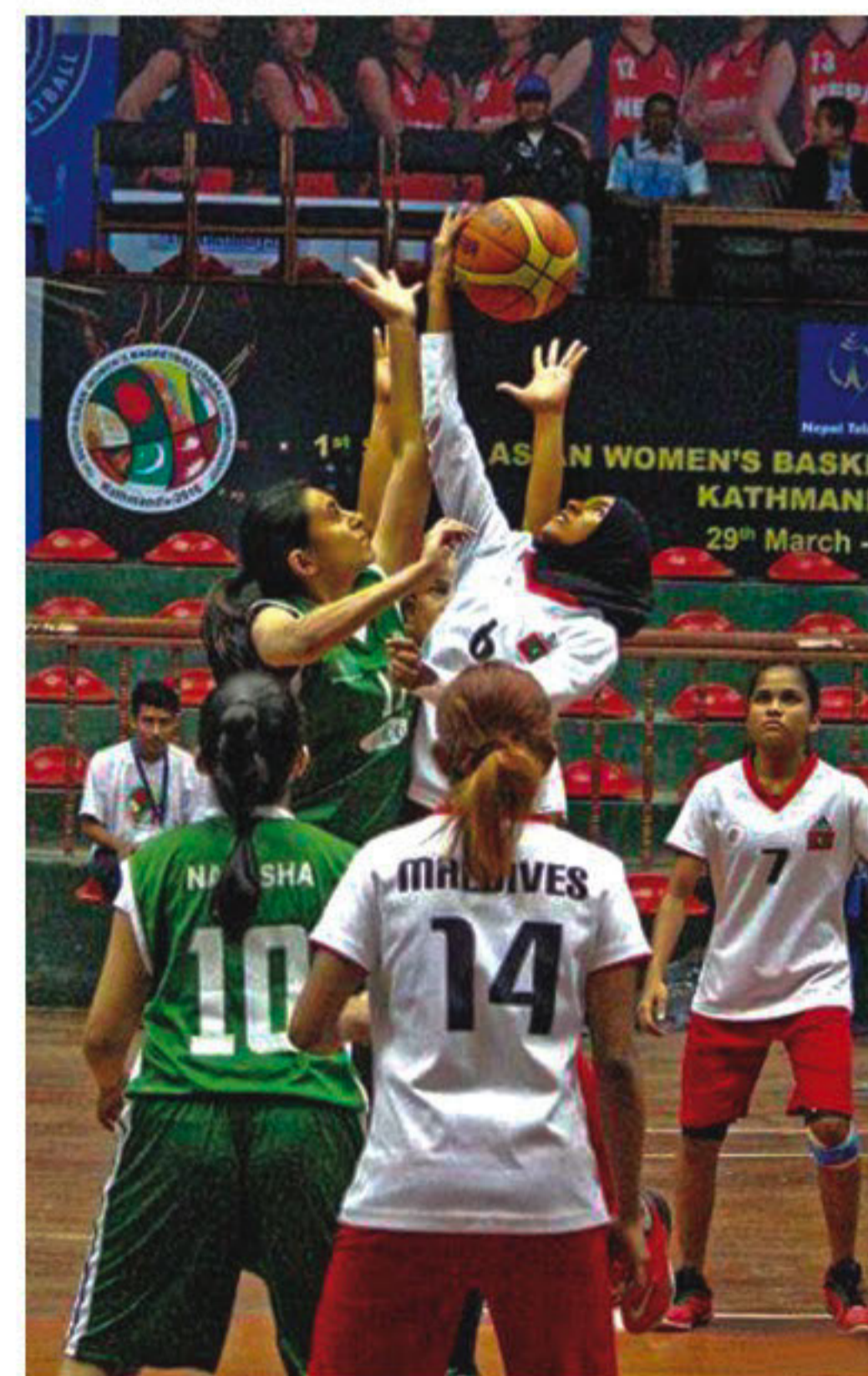
"All the years of hard work and everything we have been taught - we delivered on the court for Bangladesh. Every rebound, every Monica, Noakhali, Jhalmuri and Mridha play (that's what we call our formations. They're easier to remember this way!) -- we made it work even when it didn't. We laughed, we cried, but most of all, we enjoyed every second of that 2 hour game we played everyday" says Ashreen Mridha, shooting guard for the team.

More than just making it big on the court, the team of such young, active and spirited girls learned more than they had hoped for through this tournament. "It obviously brought more unity amongst all of us. We were trained together as a team and learned to motivate each other on and off the court in every which way," says Lamia Hafiz, Vice Captain, playing power forward and centre.

The tournament consisted of teams from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan and of course, Bangladesh. With India and Pakistan pulling out of the competition, Sri Lanka came out on top as the strongest team in the tournament, and host nation Nepal was next in the ranks. Our girls played against every team. Unfortunately, they flew back to Dhaka with no wins in their pockets, but what they did bring back was a world of experience. "We learned more about ourselves as individuals, and as a team. Playing against professional teams really showed us what our weaknesses are," says Hafiz.



PHOTOS: COURTESY



March 2016 was a pivotal moment for Women's Basketball in Bangladesh and this particularly passionate group of girls. "We always saw the federation send our men's team to international tournaments, but not the women's team. We knew we needed more experience to play against strong teams, but we needed someplace to start. This was it," says Mridha.

In a patriarchal society such as ours, women seldom get the chance to showcase such sporting talent. When they do, the opportunities themselves are filled with loopholes. "It can be quite difficult. There

are people who do not understand why we give our time and effort in playing basketball when we "should" be focusing on our career, education, or family life," says Natasha Kalam, Captain and point guard. On that note, Mridha says, "There are so many tournaments organised here and there, with no women's section. Even though we were lucky to be able to participate in the first ever South Asian tournament for women, we were asked to find sponsors ourselves. That wasn't fair." Along with this, there are other limitations the girls face, "We have girls coming from

Uttara, Gulshan, and Banani all the way to Dhanmondi at 8pm and practicing till 10pm. Along with this, the backing from the federation is quite limited and we had to practice on a court where half the side was broken," says Natasha.

But with a gem of a coach, the girls had some level of hope and a lot of inspiration. "We are very thankful to our coach, Ranjit Chandra Das. He tried, with his heart and soul, to help us in every way possible. Because of him this team was formed," says Gulnazar Mahbub Monika, playing at post. Captain Natasha continues, "If it wasn't for our coach, we probably would not have been able to participate in this championship at all."

The coach, Ranjit Chandra Das, himself has a lot of dreams for women in sports in our country. "I knew we didn't have enough training to win. But the participation itself was crucial, if we want to go somewhere with this. Most times, basketball is just a hobby. I wanted these girls to know what it's like in the long run, what professional basketball is like. I wanted them to get the experience and come back with loads of motivation.

Which they did - I see them more passionate about basketball now, training harder than ever. I will be taking the under-18 girls team to Thailand for the Asian Games soon," says Das.

This, we know, is just the beginning. With Pride Group, who is passionate about promoting empowered women, as dedicated sponsors, we can see a bright future ahead for this new and thriving team. Let's watch proudly as our girls take over the courts of the world! ■

Life high in the mountains was never easy for guest house worker Suppa Lama, but he and his fellow villagers always knew they were lucky to live in a breathtakingly beautiful valley sought out by thousands of trekkers from around the world.

That all changed a year ago when Nepal's worst earthquake and a second tremor days later killed almost 9,000 people across the Himalayan nation. More than 300 people, including 43 foreigners, died when the tranquil Langtang valley was obliterated on April 25.

Now, with Nepal's crucial, job-generating tourism industry slow to recover after the 7.8 magnitude quake, Mr Lama and millions of others anxiously await the return to the good old days. The 45-year-old is heading a committee to rebuild Langtang village - 60 visitor lodges were wiped out along the valley - but he acknowledges it will be a long haul.

"It will take at least three years before things are back to normal again, although it took us decades to build this paradise under the Himalayas," he said. "By this October, hopefully, we will have eight new lodges ready. We cannot rely on the government for help."

More than US\$4 billion (S\$5.4 billion) in aid poured in from around the world after the quake but much of that remains unspent, largely because of political wrangling over who controls the funds. People still sleep amid piles of rubble.

"We haven't heard anything about compensation. We don't have any money. How can we rebuild?" Ms Menuka Rokaya, who lives in an excavated with her husband and nine-month-old baby near the airport in the capital Kathmandu, told Agence France-Presse. They are among an estimated four million people still living in sub-standard temporary shelters, according to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

It was not until December last year that the National Reconstruction Authority began to oversee rebuilding and distributing funds.

"You had many organisations... willing to support housing reconstruction, but they had to act in a vacuum, a policy vacuum. So they could not start work," said Ms Jennifer Dwyne, who heads the international and Nepali donor reconstruction effort.

Far from the capital, and a three-day walk from the nearest road in the town of Syabrubesi, there is not much government activity in Langtang.

Mr Lama is not waiting for handouts. "We Langtangpas have got to help ourselves to rebuild as soon as we can. We need the tourists to come. If Langtang rises again, we hope that it will galvanise the whole nation to stand up for itself as it will symbolise hope for the future."

About 4 per cent of largely rural Nepal's gross domestic product comes from tourism. It provides one of the world's poorest countries with 3.5 per cent of its jobs.

In Kathmandu, where dozens of historic Unesco architectural sites were damaged, tourists are trickling back. Hotel operators say occupancy this month is only about 60 per cent of a normal April when the spring hiking season is at its peak.

"The government is rebuilding - a few



PHOTO: ANN

NEPAL QUAKE ONE YEAR ON, NEPAL IS SHAKEN BUT NOT BROKEN

DESMOND FOO



Photographs shows earthquake-damaged buildings in Durbar Square in Kathmandu on April 28, 2015 (top) and the same scene on April 23, 2016. PHOTO: AFP

sites are already built and a few are being built (and) will be completed in one to three years," said Nepal Tourism Board CEO Deepak Raj Joshi.

But tour operators say their businesses are unlikely to fully recover this year. "When you lose 85 per cent of your business... basically that's 85 per cent of your cash flow that's gone," said Mr Ashok Pokharel, president of the Nepal Association of Tour Operators.

Climbers have been reticent too, with the number getting permission to scale Mount Everest in the spring window down to 289 from last year's 357.

An avalanche triggered by the quake tore through Everest base camp last year, killing 18 people.

Few visitors have returned to Langtang, despite cleared trails and a handful of new or restored guest houses. Barely 40km from Kathmandu, a bus ride will take eight hours to reach the trail head in Syabrubesi. From there, it is a long, rough walk up the valley, gaining 2,000m in altitude in three days to finally reach Langtang village.

For survivor Chhemay Lama, 16, the tragedy unfolded as he sat at a kitchen stove with his uncle and three tourists. A student in Kathmandu, he was back in Langtang village on vacation.

There was a thundering roar and everything went dark with ash and dust, but he instinctively hid under a bed frame and a mattress - a scenario he learnt in school that would eventually save him.

The exact number of deaths in Langtang remains unknown - bodies were still being excavated as late as last month while many remain missing. Stories of loss are common in the village with 465 surviving residents. Madam Chiring Chopra, 44, who lost seven family members, is the first to open a new lodge, called New Langtang. It started operating late last month and received its first customers this month.

Langtang Valley is the third-most popular area for trekkers in Nepal after the Everest and Annapurna regions. About 15,000 make it there each year.

Passing through hamlets and villages, some abandoned, the chipping and hammering sounds of rebuilding could be heard. There was a sense of hurried expectation as the locals raced to get their lodges up and running again, but there was still no electricity or network for phones. The solar panels they rely on heavily had yet to arrive.

Trekking guide Chhime Lama, 24, said: "If word spreads that this place is safe to visit, trekkers will soon arrive and this place will be alive again. But first we need to rebuild the lodges for them to stay."

It is estimated that at least a fifth of the lodges outside Langtang village are running again but some can offer only drinks and simple food, and no accommodation for now. Lines of mule trains laden with food and supplies could be seen along the trail - a sign that life could eventually return to normal.

Not all villages are left to fend for themselves. Near Tamche, Christian Aid has installed a 10,000-litre tank and a pump to send water uphill to the village, where it built temporary shelters for 52 households, The Guardian reported.

Source: ANN