

# SPORT

## We are eager to play England series: Mash

SPORTS REPORTER

Mashrafe Bin Mortaza said with a bemused smile that everything was fine as the national camp got underway yesterday without the presence of the foreign coaches under an unfamiliar security measure that even restricted the reporters' and photojournalists' movements at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur.

Bangladesh's limited-overs captain expressed optimism over the home series against England in October even as uncertainty shrouds the country in the wake of the horrific July 1 Gulshan terrorist attack. Instead he placed emphasis on self-motivation regarding fitness in the absence of the national team's strength and conditioning coach Mario Villavarayan and getting the players ready for the upcoming home series.

"To maintain the cricket culture, I hope they (England) will come and it will be a good series," said an optimistic Mashrafe, before going on to speak about

the Tigers fans' passion for the game. "The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is working on the tour. Personally I believe the series will take place. The players and the fans have been looking forward to the tour as there has not been any international cricket for quite some time [since the end of the World T20 in early April] and the England Under-19 team came to play in the Under-19 World Cup. They had gotten adequate security then and surely will receive the same," he added.

When asked how difficult it was to keep focus on the job when there has been uncertainty, Mashrafe said: "The tour is still a long way away. The most important thing is that we must stay fit and get ready for the series because everything will not be finished here."

Mashrafe however was not yet willing to talk about how big a loss it would be for Bangladesh cricket if England do not visit as it will only extend the long wait for the Tigers to play Test cricket.

Meanwhile, England are scheduled to land in Bangladesh on September

30 for a three-ODI and two-Test series through October.

In the recent past Mario Villavarayan conducted the first part of any camp to ensure the fitness of the players but he has delayed his return, citing personal reasons, forcing the board to run the camp with the local experts.

So the obvious question was whether the absence of Mario had a negative impact as some players may start relaxing. Mashrafe however believed that it is an opportunity for the players to show their true professional character and emphasised the responsibility of the seniors in this regard.

"True, Mario's absence is not something we are used to. But we have got Ifti [local trainer Iftikharul Islam] and he is with us for long time. The players understand what they need to do and they are well aware of their responsibilities. It's not like we do everything only if we have Mario. I think it's an opportunity for the players to take their own responsibility."



In good spirits, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (R), Taskin Ahmed (L) and Sabbir Rahman, along with other members of the preliminary national squad, arrived at the BCB Academy Ground in Mirpur yesterday to take part in a gym session.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



After much anticipation, Mustafizur Rahman, pictured at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport yesterday morning, finally left for England to embark on his latest challenge with Sussex.

PHOTO: STAR

## Fizz excited by chance to learn

### First match at Sussex likely today

SPORTS REPORTER



With an aim to 'learn more' about the cricketing conditions in the United Kingdom, Mustafizur Rahman left the country yesterday morning to play for Sussex in the Natwest T20 Blast and the Royal London One-day Cup.

Speaking to reporters before his departure yesterday morning, the left-arm bowler said: "I am looking forward to this experience. I will be playing in different conditions and will definitely learn a lot."

If all goes well, the bowler will make his debut at the County Ground in Chelmsford today when Sussex takes on Essex in the Natwest T20 Blast. However, as Mustafizur put it yesterday, it's still not certain as to whether he will play the first match. Including today's match, he is likely to play a total of seven matches and is expected to stay in the UK till August 2.

There was a bit of uncertainty surrounding the pacer's departure owing to certain visa issues in the last few days, but he eventually received his visa on Tuesday. He was supposed to depart for the UK as soon as he arrived from India in May. However, he could not leave due to certain fitness concerns. He had lost plenty of weight while playing for the Sunrisers Hyderabad in the Indian Premier League. As a result, the Bangladesh Cricket Board had decided to give him a break. He spent his Eid holidays in his village in Tetulia and then went through a rehab upon his return to the capital.

## India start favourites

### First Test against West Indies starts today

AFP, North Sound



West Indies and India commence a four-Test series at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua on Thursday with the visitors heavily favoured to extend a 14-year unbeaten run against the hosts.

Such is the gap in performance between the two teams that anything less than a 3-0 triumph by the Indians will see them lose rating points in their quest to close the gap on Australia at the top of the official international Test rankings.

Despite an outstanding 2016 for the West Indies in shorter forms of the game, which has seen success at the Under-19 World Cup in Bangladesh, triumph for both the men's and women's teams at the World T20 in India and an encouraging effort in reaching the final of the Tri-Nation One-Day International Series on home soil last month, they continue to struggle in the traditional Test arena.

They lost 2-0 in both their last two series in Sri Lanka and Australia at the end of 2015.

Periods of competitiveness were too fleeting in those matches, highlighting the chronic inconsistency of the Caribbean side which has left them languishing eighth in the world Test rankings with only Bangladesh and Zimbabwe below them.

West Indies selectors have taken the bold step of dropping experienced wicketkeeper-batsman Denesh Ramdin for Shane Dowrich, who made his Test debut as a specialist batsman against Australia in Dominica a year ago.

They have stuck with veteran batsman Marlon Samuels, but he is badly in need of a run of scores. Functional but unattractive opener Kraigg Brathwaite will be entrusted with the tough task of providing solidity at the top of the order.

West Indies' biggest concern, though, is in the bowling department where the two main wicket-takers, pacer Shannon Gabriel and leg-spinner Devendra Bishoo, have been injury-prone over the past 12 months.

Fast-medium bowler Miguel Cummins is tipped for a Test debut having replaced the retired Jerome Taylor while skipper Jason Holder and fellow all-rounder Carlos Brathwaite are likely to be called upon to produce long, tight spells of medium pace.

India appear to be contemplating omitting the seasoned Rohit Sharma from their middle-order and still seem undecided over the pace-spin balance of their bowling attack on a pitch that traditionally gets slower and lower over five days.

Spinners Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja are likely to be relied upon in Antigua, but India possess a third spin option in Amit Mishra.

## Simmons calls for patience

AGENCIES, North Sound

West Indies coach Phil Simmons told his team patience will be decisive in their four-Test series against India.

Simmons' team are preparing for their first five-day series since losing 2-0 to Australia in December and January.

Ahead of the first Test starting Thursday in Antigua, Simmons said persevering with bat and ball would be crucial against India - ranked second in the world.

"We tend to get bored of bowling in one place and doing well and not getting wickets so we try something," he told a news conference.

"We're going to harp on being patient and do the things we're doing well so then we'll get the wickets and the same thing with batting. You battle on and you stick around and you work hard and you'll get the just reward at the end."

West Indies are without paceman Jerome Taylor, who retired from the five-day format earlier this month.

Simmons acknowledged the absence of the 32-year-old would make things harder for his team.

"He will be missed because he's the most experienced fast bowler we have and he'll be missed

## Yasir best since Warne: Stokes

AFP, Manchester



England all-rounder Ben Stokes hailed Pakistan's Yasir Shah on Wednesday as the best leg-spinner since Australia great Shane Warne. Shah bowled Pakistan to a 75-run win over England in the first Test at Lord's last week with a brilliant match-haul of 10 for 141.

His return left Shah atop the International Cricket Council Test bowler rankings and was all the more impressive as the pitch at Lord's did not offer excessive turn.

That left Shah with 86 wickets in a mere 13 Tests at an average of 23, compared to Warne's mammoth 708 in 145 Tests at just over 25 apiece in a career that ended in 2007.

Conditions could favour Shah far more at Old Trafford, where the second Test starts on Friday.

Stokes, who will hope to make his return to Test cricket at the Manchester ground after a knee injury, was in no doubt of Shah's quality.

"Yasir Shah, I reckon, is the best leg-spinner since Shane Warne," Stokes told an Old Trafford press conference broadcast on Sky Sports. "They are a very good team but we go into the Test match knowing how he goes about bowling and we should be able to counteract that," the Durham all-rounder added.

"[The conditions are] another thing we will have to try and adapt to and we'll just see how it goes."

Stokes has not played for England since injuring his knee in the first Test against Sri Lanka in May.

He returned to action as a batsman only with Durham before, after being deemed not fully fit for the Pakistan opener, bowling for his county against Lancashire last week.

Having not shown any adverse effects following his bowling stint, the 25-year-old Stokes is eager to resume his England career.

"It's the first game where I have played doing both parts of my game," he explained. "I have been playing as a batsman for two weeks, it is something I definitely did need, to get myself back into match situations."

"I have been bowling in the nets but you can't replicate doing that, the only thing you can do is bowl in a game. So it was good on that point and it was a massive confidence boost. It seems a lot longer than it has been."



The Bangladesh Cricket Board has upped the ante in terms of its security measures across its facilities in the wake of the attack at the Holey Artisan Bakery earlier this month. CCTV cameras (L) have been installed at different points of the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium and (R) journalists who sought entrance had to go through a vigorous screening process before they were allowed to queue and pass through metal detectors.

PHOTOS: STAR



## Federer, Nadal out of Toronto

AFP, Toronto

Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal on Tuesday pulled out of next week's Toronto Masters, joining Wimbledon champion Andy Murray in deciding to skip the event.

17-time major champion Federer's last match was his loss to Canadian Milos Raonic in the Wimbledon semifinals, while Nadal, who has won 14 titles in Grand Slam tournaments, has not played since withdrawing from the French Open in May with a wrist injury.

## Spinners to play key role: MS

AFP, New Delhi



Mahendra Singh Dhoni Wednesday said spinners would play a key role in India's upcoming four-match Test series in the West Indies, despite the Caribbean's reputation as a paceman's paradise.

Although Dhoni remains India's limited overs skipper, the Test side will be led in the West Indies by batsman Virat Kohli, who will be able to call on the services of two of the world's leading spinners -- Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja.

Speaking to reporters in New Delhi on the eve of the first Test in Antigua, Dhoni

said that the same pitches where fast bowlers such as Curtly Ambrose and Michael Holding once wreaked havoc were now conducive to slow bowling.

"What we have seen over the years is that the West Indian wickets have slowed down... which means the spinners will have a major role in the series," Dhoni told reporters.

Although the likes of Ashwin have thrived in recent Test cricket, India has struggled to produce a top fast bowler for some years. Their current attack spearhead Mohammed Shami is only just returning after a lengthy injury lay-off.

But Dhoni insisted that India had a fine pool of talent to call on in the

Caribbean, where Ishant Sharma, Umesh Yadav and Bhuvneshwar Kumar are also likely to play a key role.

"Good thing about Indian bowling right now is that they have a good pool of eight to 10 quick bowlers who were all pushing for selection for the tour squad."

"So that gives management the liberty of picking the best bowlers and whatever is needed in that scenario," said the 35-year-old Dhoni.

Indian batting stars like Kohli, Ajinkya Rahane, Rohit Sharma and Murali Vijay have also shown glimpses of what they are capable of in the two practice games -- with Dhoni certainly impressed.