

SPORT

The same applies for us: Mash

Security briefing for England players today

SPORTS REPORTER

If there is one personality who provides leadership and food for thought in Bangladesh's cricket community, he is limited-overs skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. In a year when the Tigers have played only T20I cricket, and that too up until late March, England's scheduled visit for a Test and ODI tour in October has assumed special importance to cricket lovers.

With the July 1 terrorist attack on Gulshan's Holy Artisan Bakery casting doubts over the tour, the England team are going to be briefed today about the security situation by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) security team that departed Dhaka last Saturday.

Mashrafe, speaking to reporters in Mirpur yesterday, said perhaps the most moving words on the topic when asked about UK newspaper The Telegraph's report on Monday suggesting that the security team were concerned about travel safety within the cities of Dhaka and Chittagong.



"I don't know in what context this was talked about but I think that we have the ability to transport the players safely," Mashrafe said, and added: "We also have families, we are also humans. The travel situation also affects us. I think the ECB can handle this quite well, since this is not a very difficult job."

For all of the consumers of news in both England and Bangladesh, this sound-bite should provide a

jolt. Cricket lovers in Bangladesh are desperate to see some action, but may not necessarily appreciate what their heroes risk. By the same token the England team, Mashrafe's potential opponents but more than that his colleagues in the sport of cricket, will be reminded that they are only being asked to do what their brothers in sport are doing on a daily basis half a world away, and that too with greatly increased

security measures.

These words did not seem to be said out of any sort of frustration; on the contrary Mashrafe showered praise on the English for their support in the past.

"England has been with us from day one and I believe they will be with us now as well. They sent their team to the U-19 World Cup [in January 2016]. I am still hopeful that they will continue to stand beside us," said the ever-popular fast bowler from Narail.

The Under-19 World Cup, which Bangladesh hosted, represents a strong argument for England visiting. The Australian senior team had declined to tour in October last year and that reticence extended to the juniors in the Under-19 World Cup, but England sent their team along with all the other nations and the tournament went off without a hitch.

Eoin Morgan, the England ODI skipper, muddied waters further on Tuesday when he implied that the decision to tour may be left up to individuals.

Asserting that he has full faith in his board, the ECB and their security team, Mashrafe urged his

English counterparts to do the same. "As a player, when the cricket board is taking responsibility, you have to keep your faith on them. If the BCB told us to go somewhere, then we definitely would. This whole issue depends on the BCB and ECB. I believe that the players should play and leave the rest to the cricket boards.

"To each and every player I would say, you should come. Once you come here you won't even get the chance to think about anything other than the game. You can play here safely and it will be a very competitive series. And I believe that if we play in this kind of situation, our friendship will get deeper," was Mashrafe's impassioned plea.

"From what I have heard, our security forces are giving it the highest attention. I have confidence in them since we have hosted many big tournaments in the recent past."

The tour's fate may well be known by day's end today, and either way the decision will have to be taken in good spirits because questions over safety can never be simple. But Mashrafe in his inimitable way has made the strongest case yet for the tour going ahead.

Saintfiet fumes at players' absence

SPORTS REPORTER



Belgian coach Tom Saintfiet yesterday expressed his displeasure following the absence of eleven national players from the ongoing training camp for the Asian Cup play-off qualifiers against Bhutan.

Five players -- Mamunul Islam, Raihan Hasan, Sohel Rana, Jewel Rana and Shahidul Alam Sohel -- who are also employees of Bangladesh Navy, skipped the afternoon training to play in the Inter-Service football final against Bangladesh Army.

With only days to go before such an important match, Saintfiet, who has been appointed on a two-month contract, was visibly enraged by the players' at the no-show of many players.

"Eleven players are not here. There is no national team in the world who can prepare seven or 11 days before a match without 11 players. Six players are in Bhutan, while five players are not here today at training. It is very unprofessional," said Saintfiet acridly while conducting the training at Kamalapur yesterday.

Although he was aware where the players were, but he said: "I didn't give them permission. I don't agree." He was clearly annoyed with the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF's) decision to allow the five players to play the final at a crucial time of the training.

And the seasoned coach, whom the BFF had to pry away from the Nigerian football team after long negotiations, has raised a very valid question.

Team manager Iqbal Hossain, who initially tried to sell a story to the reporters that the players had been rested, however admitted that the five players got the permission from the BFF to play the final.

AFC WOMEN'S C'SHIP Kyrgyzstan arrive

SPORTS REPORTER

Kyrgyzstan became the first to arrive here yesterday to take part in the AFC Under-16 Women's Championship Qualifiers which will get underway at the Bangabandhu National Stadium from Saturday.

There will be a total of six teams taking part in the tournament.

United Arab Emirates, Singapore and Iran are scheduled to arrive today, while Chinese Taipei are scheduled to land tomorrow. The hosts are the other team.

After this round of matches, the next games will be on the 27th and then again on the 29th. Three matches will be played everyday.

In the end, the group champions will advance to the final round.

INTER-SERVICE FOOTBALL Navy win title

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Navy won the inter-service football title with 2-1 win against Bangladesh Army in a nail-biting final at the Army Stadium yesterday.

The event, organized by Bangladesh Navy Sports Board, featured the bests of the three services teams who played each other in the first phase from where the top two teams made their way into the final. Navy's Abu Sayeed Jewel Rana won the Best Player's award.

Commandant of AFMC Major General Md Faisur Rahman witnessed the final as chief guest and distributed prizes among the winners.

Dearth of strikers gives rise to fears

SPORTS REPORTER



With no prolific strikers to lead the line, the Bangladesh national football team have been struggling at the international level for a few years and this aspect will be the biggest headache for them ahead of their home match against Bhutan in their Asian Cup play-off qualifying tie next month.

In contrast, Bhutan -- who have long been considered lightweights in the football world and are currently 193rd in the FIFA rankings -- are on their way up thanks to their lethal striking duo of Tshering Dorji and Chencho Gyeltshen.

So far, Bangladesh have enjoyed the upper hand on Bhutan, winning seven of their eight matches and drawing the other.

Bhutan made it to the Joint Qualifiers for the World Cup and Asian Cup, where they defeated Sri Lanka twice, courtesy of strikes from Dorji and Gyeltshen. Although the tiny Himalayan nation fell at the next stage, but Dorji and Gyeltshen combined to hit the net five times, which is a stark contrast in terms of scoring to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh could only find the back of the net twice in their eight World Cup and Asian Cup Qualifying matches. One of those goals came from Zahid Hasan Emily, while the other was a suicidal own goal.

With Emily -- Bangladesh's last recognised hitman -- in the twilight of his career and nursing a knee injury, the remaining strikers of the national team like Shakhawat Hossain Rony, Nabib Newaj Jibon and Aminur Rahman Sajib have failed time and again at both international and domestic levels with their poor finishing.

The current crop of strikers -- Rony, Jibon and Sajib -- have made it to head coach Tom Saintfiet's preliminary squad, but they have been enduring a lean patch in the domestic league. Rony and Jibon have yet to open their accounts while Sajib has only scored one goal so far.

In the case of Rony however, an exception may be made as the Sheikh Russel forward is much different when donning the national colours and he had shown that with two goals against Bhutan in the SAAF Championship and another brace in the 4-2 win over Sri Lanka in last year's Bangabandhu Gold Cup.

Away from the trio of strikers, there are some promising players in Saintfiet's squad, including the in-form Jewel Rana, Rubel Mia and Abdullah and Mehdi Hasan Tapu. In the current season, right winger Rubel leads the goalscoring charts with six goals followed by Jewel and Tapu, who have four each, while Abdullah and Sentu Chandra scored three and two goals respectively.

Nevertheless, the Belgian coach's biggest worry will be confining Bhutan's lethal striking duo while hoping that his strikers can fire to ensure that Bangladesh cross the hurdle in the Asian Cup play-off qualifiers.



Ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan joined Bangladesh's training camp at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday following his CPL stint and a short family break away in the Maldives.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Russel take on Tertons today

SPORTS REPORTER

Struggling Sheikh Russel are looking forward to ending the AFC Cup play-off qualifying campaign on a high by winning their last match against Bhutanese club FC Tertons at the Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu today.

Sheikh Russel are in second position with one point -- one behind leaders Tatum FC of China's Taipei -- and have no alternative but to win against the third-place home side if they want to qualify for the play-off round for the second-tier club tournament in Asia.

Sheikh Russel played comparatively well against Tatum FC with the inclusion of four guest players and took a deserved lead but they surrendered the lead ten minutes before the final whistle. Tatum FC had earlier held FC Tertons to a goalless draw in the Group C opener.

"After watching the match between FC Tertons and Tatum FC, it seemed to me the Tertons are a comparatively strong side, comprising 10 national players. I think the match will not be an easy one for us but we are ready to give them a fight as we want to qualify for the next round," Sheikh Russel coach Maruful Haque told reporters over phone.

Lanka level series with record win

AFP, Colombo



Skipper Angelo Mathews Wednesday led from the front with his all-round showing to help Sri Lanka register a comprehensive 82-run win against

Australia in the second one-day international to level the series at 1-1 in Colombo. Australia, who were chasing a record 289 for victory at R Premadasa Stadium, were bowled out for 206 in 47.2 overs with Matthew Wade top-scoring with 76 runs.

Left-arm spinner Amila Aponso claimed four wickets while medium-pace Thisara Perera took three wickets to choke the Australian run chase.

But it was man of the match Mathews' two wickets and a 57 with the bat that made Sri Lanka register their biggest win against Australia in terms of runs.

Sri Lanka's previous best was a 79-run triumph at the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) in 2003.

Australia's James Faulkner recorded his first ODI hat-trick but Sri Lanka, who chose to bat first, still managed to post 288 in 48.5 overs.

In reply Australia, who won the first of the five ODIs by three wickets, were dealt early blows after losing their openers to Thisara Perera.

David Warner was caught behind for 1 while Aaron Finch, who scored a half-century in the first ODI, was bowled for four with Australia left struggling at 16 for two.

Skipper Steve Smith tried to fight back with his 33-ball 30, his innings laced with five boundaries, but his wicket off Aponso spelt more trouble for the visitors.

George Bailey and Wade put together a 61-run fourth wicket partnership to keep Australia in the hunt but the required run-rate just kept mounting.

Bailey, who scored 27 off 46 balls, finally succumbed to the pressure of scoring quick runs after being bowled by Aponso, who registered impressive figures of 4-18 in just his second ODI.

Leg-spinner Seekkuge Prasanna soon joined forces with Aponso to get Moises Henriques, who scored four runs, stumped as Sri Lanka gained control of the match.

Matthew Wade then staged a gritty fightback with support from Travis Head as the duo managed 64 runs between them to keep Australia's hopes alive.

Wade's 88-ball knock was studded with three boundaries as the wicketkeeper-batsman finally became Thisara Perera's third victim and the Australian resistance wilted.

Head, who scored 31, soon got out to Mathews as the visitors lost their way into the chase, losing their final five wickets for 24 runs.

The hosts rode on half-centuries from Mathews, Kusal Mendis and Kusal Perera to put up a respectable score against a persistent Australian bowling attack led by Faulkner (3-45).

SCORES IN BRIEF

SRI LANKA: 288 all out in 49.5 overs (Mendis 69, Chandimal 48, Mathews 57, Perera 54; Starc 3-53, Faulkner 3-45, Zampa 3-42)

AUSTRALIA: 206 all out in 47.2 overs (Smith 30, Wade 76; Mathews 2-17, Perera 3-33, Aponso 4-18)

Result: Sri Lanka win by 82 runs
Player of the match: Mathews

Pakistan post fighting 260

AFP, Southampton

Pakistan captain Azhar Ali led from the front with 82 before England fought back to hold the tourists to 260 for six in the first one-day international at Southampton on Wednesday.

In a rain-interrupted innings, Sarfraz Ahmed (55) was the only other batsman to make a fifty and Pakistan's plight in this day-night clash would have been worse had Azhar not twice been dropped on nine.

Azhar won the toss in the first of this five-match series and elected to bat in what was then bright sunshine.

Sharjeel Khan, carrying on from his blistering 152 in last week's 255-run win over Ireland, struck three fours in 15 balls.

But the left-handed opener fell for 16 when he top-edged a pull off fast bowler Mark Wood and was caught behind by Jos Buttler.

England, whose fielding had proved fallible during a recent 2-2 drawn Test series against Pakistan, then twice dropped Azhar.

He was put down in the gully by Alex Hales off Wood, playing his first match for England since a Test against Pakistan in Dubai in October following persistent ankle problems.



Commandant of Armed Forces Medical College Major General Md Faisur Rahman (L) hands over the winner's trophy to the Bangladesh Navy team at the Army Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: ISPR