



Mustafizur Rahman and Soumya Sarkar took in the sights of Christchurch yesterday, but ahead of the first ODI at the Hagley Oval tomorrow, their focus will solely be on the match. Soumya will be keen to get in the runs and return to form, while Mustafizur will be eyeing a few wickets on his first international game back from injury.

PHOTOS: COLLECTED

## Pacers hold the key

SPORTS REPORTER



How difficult is this series going to be for Bangladesh? A mere glance at New Zealand's record at home perhaps best describes the huge task that lies ahead for the Tigers.

Since 2015, the Black Caps have played 25 ODIs at home and have won 21 of those. The only teams who have managed to beat them in ODIs in the last two years have been Sri Lanka and Australia.

While the Aussies beat them once in February this year, the Lankans managed to beat them thrice and two of those wins came during a long seven-match ODI series.

None of the other teams who toured New Zealand during this period -- Pakistan, West Indies and South Africa -- managed to repeat the feat.

Even a powerhouse like India, who toured New Zealand back in January 2014, lost the five-match ODI series 4-0.

For Bangladesh to win even one game in this three-match ODI series, they will need all their players to be alert and at their best.

### HEAD TO HEAD

BANGLADESH	ALL ODIs	NEW ZEALAND
8	25	17
ODIs IN NEW ZEALAND		
0	7	7

### KEY PLAYERS



SHAKIB AL HASAN

Matches:	163
Runs:	4566
High Score:	134
Batting Avg:	34.85
100s/50s:	6/31
Wickets:	215



KANE WILLIAMSON

Matches:	101
Runs:	3980
High Score:	145
Batting Avg:	46.27
100s/50s:	8/26
Wickets:	27

They will be encouraged by the fact that their batting record against New Zealand, away from home, is a lot better than against a majority of the other full member nations.

Bangladesh's batsmen average 21.75 against the Black Caps away from home.

They have better numbers only against Ireland, Zimbabwe and England.

In addition, they also have two batsmen who have scored centuries against New Zealand away from home -- Mahmudullah Riyad and Imrul Kayes. Only in Zimbabwe, with five centuries, have they managed to put in a better display.

However, it has been their bowlers that have let them down during tours to New Zealand. Their bowlers average 49 in New Zealand in just seven ODIs.

Their over reliance on slow left-arm bowlers and spinners in the past was one of the reasons why they failed to win in New Zealand.

However, with Bangladesh's pace department having gone through a major makeover in the last two years, things could be interesting in this series.

On the one hand you have got a team that has an impeccable home record and on the other side you have got the Tigers who have surprised the world in the last two years.

While New Zealand will definitely be the favourites in this series, they won't be foolish enough to take this series for granted.

## 'Batsmen need to get good starts' Boulton, Southee to be rested sporadically

AL-AMIN from Christchurch



Bangladesh have not won a single match in their previous visits to New Zealand. So, ahead of their latest bout against the Black Caps that starts with the Boxing Day ODI at the Hagley Oval in Christchurch on Monday, questions were asked about whether the Tigers could end the long-standing jinx this time around.

The answers were not straightforward and ask Shakib Al Hasan, the premier all-rounder who took the Tigers close to that goal with his virtuoso all-round show twice -- the only ODI at the Hagley Oval in 2010 and the other being in the 2015 World Cup at Wellington -- and he would tell you with a mischievous smile on his face: "The weather is very good".

The sun shone brilliantly on Christchurch yesterday, allowing the Tigers to have their first training session at the oval-shaped ground and its green surroundings. But Shakib, who had scored a fighting 36 and then followed that up with four-wickets to run the Black Caps

deep into the final ten overs before losing the game by three wickets in 2010, refused to make further comments.

Bangladesh's batting coach Thilan Samaraweera however was more engaging about the prospects of the recent crop of Tigers, which is carrying some exciting young talents both in bowling and batting.

"After 45 days of the Bangladesh Premier League cricket we are very happy with what our batters are doing at the moment," said the Sri Lankan, adding that staying at the wicket early in the innings would be the key for success on this type of pitch.

He acknowledged that nobody scored big in the lone practice game in Auckland, but appeared optimistic ahead of the first ODI.

"We were not very concerned because of the practice game. But you have to be good enough to cope in these conditions if you get a good start. It's not easy to get a good start early. But I think we have been getting better and better in the last two years. We had a very good World Cup in New Zealand [in 2015] and gave them a very good score to chase," said the shaven-headed Lankan.

Bangladesh's two competitive

scores in New Zealand were actually built around two fantastic centuries with left-handed opener Imrul Kayes hitting 101 in Christchurch while Mahmudullah scored a fabulous 128 in Wellington last year.

"We have talked about getting an



THILAN SAMARAWEEERA

early start and getting used to the bounce and seam. It's easy to bat when the ball gets old," said Samaraweera, adding that a score of 265 would be a very good total.

"I think 255-260 is a huge score as far as the last five games on this ground are concerned and we are focusing on that.

"I think the Hagley Oval was never big a field. I had a chat with the groundsman and he said that they would go with more square boundaries which will be 70 to 75 meters which would be fair enough. I think the straight boundary will be shorter, about 60 to 65," said the Tigers' batting coach.

He was also happy to see left-handed batsman Soumya Sarkar hitting a bit of form.

"His average is 47 in the last two years. Every cricketer from Sachin [Tendulkar] to [Kumar] Sangakkara goes through it. The main thing is that the support staff should back him. The good thing is he is hitting well; both in Australia and in the practice game in Auckland. Hopefully he will find his best on this tour," Samaraweera said about the natural stroke-maker who has been starving for runs for quite some time.

Asked whether Soumya's lack of form has anything to do with his technique, Samaraweera said: "Not much. We talk about a little bit of technical stuff. But we talk more about the mindset, such as how to get a start. We talk about little little things which of course we can't

AFP, Christchurch



New Zealand's desire for a confidence-boosting limited overs series against Bangladesh, starting on Monday, has been tempered by the need to ease the workloads of Tim Southee and Trent Boult.

From the high of winning a Test series against Pakistan in November the switch to the shorter game brought the New Zealanders sharply back to earth early this month when hammered 3-0 by Australia.

The three ODIs against Bangladesh, which begin in Christchurch on Boxing Day, offer a shot at redemption but coach Mike Hesson is wary about the possibility of burnout with home series against Australia and South Africa to follow.

"It's always a balancing act with guys that play all three forms, especially the bowlers," Hesson said Saturday, confirming Boult will sit out the last ODI, Southee will miss the three T20s that follow, and other players may also be rested.

Following the Australia drubbing, New Zealand resisted the urge for wholesale changes but did recall veterans Neil Broom and Luke Ronchi.

## Warners slams Smith's critics

REUTERS, Melbourne



Australia vice-captain David Warner has found it "bizarre" that pundits and fans continue to criticise the team despite winning their last two Test matches after a run of five losses.

Australia beat Pakistan by 39 runs in a thrilling finish in the first Test in Brisbane last week.

Misbah-ul-Haq's side were dismissed for 450 on the final day at the Gabba, chasing a victory target of 490, having counter-attacked late on the fourth evening of the day-night test.

They were within sight of the world's largest successful run chase when Mitchell Starc ended a 71-run ninth-wicket stand between Asad Shafiq and Yasir Shah that effectively ended the game.

Critics, however, suggested that Australia captain Steve Smith was not ruthless enough when he failed to impose the follow on when Pakistan were skittled for 142 in their first innings, 287 runs short of Australia's total.

His cautious field settings on Day Five, with Pakistan needing 108 runs for victory with two wickets in hand, were queried by ex-captains Michael Clarke and Mark Taylor and slammed as "ridiculous" by ex-England skipper Michael Vaughan.

"It's bizarre people are mentioning things about the way he [Smith] went about the game with his field placements, his bowling changes, the way he used Gazza [Nathan Lyon]," Warner told reporters. "At the end of the day we did win the game. There would be a lot more talk if we didn't."

"Pakistan played very well," Warner said. "They backed themselves and played their shots. They got into a fantastic position to win the game. But we know that test match cricket comes down to that last day, that last hour... and that delivery from Starc was right on the money."



DAVID WARNER

## India retain U-19 Asia Cup

IANS, Colombo

Skipper Abhishek Sharma led from the front to help India beat Sri Lanka by 34 runs and clinch the ACC Under-19 Asia Cup title here on Friday.

Opting to bat after winning the toss, India posted a competitive 273 for 8 in their 50 overs and then rode on a clinical display by the spinners to bowl the hosts out for 239 in 48.4 overs at the R. Premadasa Stadium in Colombo.

Prithvi Shaw and Himanshu Rana shared a solid 67-run opening partnership to give the defending champions a solid start. Thereafter, Shubhman Gill smashed a brilliant 70 and shared an 88-run stand for the second wicket with Rana to help India dominate the proceedings.

In response Reven Kelly and Hasitha Boyagoda stabilised Sri Lanka after opener Vishva Chaturanga fell with a 78-run stand.

With a comfortable win in sight for the hosts, Rahul Chahar's sensational return catch pumped up the visitors.

The Lankans were once at 196 for 3 but a couple of wickets from Chahar and a couple more from Sharma resulted in a collapse where the hosts lost seven wickets for 43 runs.

## First target: semifinals

*Women's football team leave for India tomorrow*

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh women's football team will leave tomorrow morning for Siliguri, India to take part in the 4th SAFF Women's Championship with the hope of qualifying for the semifinals, a stage Bangladesh had qualified for twice before.

Bangladesh will start their campaign taking on Afghanistan on December 29 before facing three-time champions India in the Group B's final match on December 31. The seven-team tournament is scheduled to get underway tomorrow.

Though coach Golam Rabbani Choton and captain Sabina Khatun revealed their targets as reaching the semifinals at an official press conference yesterday, their hidden desire is to book a final berth for the first time.

Bangladesh's dream of playing the regional women football's final was dashed by Nepal in both semifinals in 2010 and 2014 and this time, Nepal, who have been pitted in Group A, are again expected to be their opponents in the semifinals if Bangladesh can make a winning start against Afghanistan, whom they had handed a 6-1 defeat in the last edition in Pakistan.

"Though we conceded three goals in the first 15 minutes against Nepal during the SA Games earlier this year due to a few mistakes, we played really well in the rest of that match," Choton said. "This time the match will be 50-50 and either of the sides can win provided we advance to the semifinals."

The 20-member squad consists of only five senior players including two goalkeepers while the rest of squad is made up of players the from under-16 side, which successfully qualified for the final round of next year's AFC U-16 women's championship. Choton is expected to bank on these young girls he



National women's football team captain Sabina Khatun (3rd from L) wears a confident look as the team's official jersey for the 4th SAFF Women's Championship is unveiled during a press conference at the BFF House yesterday. Bangladesh will leave for Siliguri tomorrow, with their first match scheduled for December 29.

PHOTO: BFF

has been nursing for the last three years.

"Had we got two senior players -- Suinu Marma and Trishna in the squad, our strength would have increased. However, there are 15 players in the squad who have experience of playing for the national team and the inclusion of the under-16 girls is a boost for the team," said Choton, who however believed Bangladesh are still behind India and Nepal because the average age of majority of the Bangladesh players is half of those of India and Nepal.

Choton also vowed to fight against India despite the fact that Bangladesh suffered six straight defeats against them at senior level.

"The matches between India and Bangladesh used to be confined on the Bangladesh half before,

but in the last meeting in SA Games, Bangladesh too played in India's half and pulled one goal back for the first time," said the successful women's coach.

Captain Sabina echoed the same sentiment and promised to give their best.

"Our main target is to qualify for the semifinals by beating Afghanistan and then go match by match. We will be trying to give our best and try to get the best result," said Sabina, who has been representing the national team since 2009.

**SQUAD:** Sabina Akter, Sheuli Azim, Shamsunnahar, Nargis Khatun, Masura Parvin, Sanjida Akter, Mainu Marma, Ishrat Jahan Mousumi, Sabina Khatun, Sirat Jahan Swapna, Marzia, Krishna Rani, Nilufa Yasmin Neela, Maria Manda, Anai Mogini, Israt Jahan Ratna, Anichuning Mogini, Rowshan Ara, Munmun Akter