

MODI GETS CR7-SIGNED JERSEY

India Prime Minister Narendra Modi received a special gift from visiting Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa yesterday. After holding bilateral talks, Modi was given the home jersey of the Portugal national team signed by one of the world's greatest sporting icons, footballer Cristiano Ronaldo. Costa has his origin in Indian state of Goa and his 150-year-old ancestral house is situated on Rua Abade Faria in the heart of Margao in Goa which is a former Portuguese colony. In a statement Modi said that Portugal's strength in football and the rapid development of the sport in India could form the nucleus of an emerging partnership in sporting disciplines.

— PALLAB BHATTACHARYA from NEW DELHI



Novak ends Andy's streak

AFP, Doha



Novak Djokovic brought world number one Andy Murray's 28-match winning streak to an end in Doha on Saturday to retain the Qatar Open title in a three-set thriller.

Serb star Djokovic won 6-3, 5-7, 6-4 in a high-quality, action-packed match between the two best players in the world lasting almost three hours.

It is Djokovic's 25th career victory over Murray and puts down an early-season marker against his great British rival, before the Australian Open later this month.

Describing Murray as his "biggest rival", he said both players had "dragged each other" to their limits.

"Every match we play is a huge challenge, you have to accept and expect a great battle," Djokovic told reporters.

"You saw tonight how much we both wanted to win."

He added that he wanted to finish the match off earlier.

"I had three or four match points in

the second set, he turned it around and I thought: Wow! I hope this isn't payback time!"

"He was close ... all the way to the last shot you never know with Andy," added Djokovic who was penalised a point in the second set after destroying his racquet as the tension mounted.

Despite going into the third set showing signs of frustration and weariness, Djokovic was able to claw away any momentum Murray had to secure his second successive title in Qatar and the \$209,665 first prize.

A break of Murray's serve in the seventh game of the final set -- when the Scot looked most likely to win -- proved decisive.

Serving for the match, Djokovic secured the title on his fourth match point, having squandered three in the second set when Murray astonishingly recovered from 5-4 down and 40-15 to win three games in a row and force, at that point, an unlikely deciding set.

It was Murray's first competitive defeat since losing to Juan Martin del Potro in the Davis Cup back in September.

In a typically cagey start between the

pair, Djokovic landed the first blow with his only breakpoint of the first set.

In the eighth game of the opener, he came back from 40-15 down to win four consecutive points and break Murray's serve.

Then, in the seventh game of the second set Djokovic broke Murray again despite falling over and banging his head during one rally.

It seemed to be the decisive blow, but Murray would not be easily brushed aside, rallying to take the game into the decider.

Murray said he was "obviously disappointed" to lose but was not downbeat.

"I think physically it was a good test to start the year," he said.

He added that he lost having failed to capitalise on his chances.

"I had a break point at 3-2. In the last game I had love-30 on Novak's serve and played a couple of loose shots. I think I had the first break point in the first set as well, didn't get it. He had one and took it, that was the difference this evening."



Novak Djokovic ended Britain's World No. 1 Andy Murray's 28-game winning streak as the Serbian clinched the Qatar Open 6-3, 5-7, 6-4 in Doha on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

The Daily Star in last eight

SPORTS REPORTER

The Daily Star moved into the quarterfinals of the Kool-BSJA Media Cup Football tournament after playing out a goalless draw against Alokito Bangladesh in their last group match at the artificial turf of Bangladesh Football Federation yesterday.

The Daily Star pipped Alokito Bangladesh to pole position on goal difference and set up a quarterfinal clash against Boishakhi Television. Daily Shamokal, Somoy Television, Independent TV, Bangla Vision, Daily Janakantha and Dhaka Tribune also ensured their quarterfinal berths.

In the day's matches, Independent TV played out a 1-1 draw with Jamuna Television, Shamokal routed SA TV 8-0, Somoy TV beat Banik Barta 3-2, Bangla Vision beat Bangladesh Protidin 4-3 in tiebreaker, Boishakhi Television beat Jagonews 5-0 while Banik Barta beat Daily Sangbad 2-0.

All-America qualifiers mulled

Vote for World Cup expansion on Tuesday

REUTERS, Zurich



FIFA has proposed merging the CONCACAF and South American qualifiers as part of its plans to expand the 2026 World Cup, a leading official from the region said in a newspaper interview.

Venezuelan Football Federation president Laureano Gonzalez said the idea for the merger had come from FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

Gonzalez, who is also a vice-president of CONMEBOL, the governing body for South America, said it would want at least 14 places at the finals for the two regions combined before accepting the proposal.

CONCACAF represents North and Central America as well as the Caribbean.

The FIFA Council is due to vote on Tuesday whether to increase the number of teams at the finals from the current 32 to either 40 or 48 from 2026. FIFA will decide at a later date which regions will be awarded the additional slots.

CONMEBOL currently has four-and-a-half places at the World Cup for its 10 members while CONCACAF, which has 35 FIFA members in its ranks, has three-and-a-half places.

"There is a suggestion from Gianni Infantino to unify the CONMEBOL and CONCACAF qualifiers," Gonzalez told the Venezuelan sports daily Meridiano.

"This would have support if they gave us more places. At the moment, we have seven between the two confederations, plus two half places," he said.

"If this went up to 14, similar to what Europe has for more or less the same number of teams, the idea would catch on on the continent."

FIFA could not immediately be reached for comment. Europe currently has 13 places for 55 teams, plus one for 2018 World Cup hosts Russia.

CONCACAF is also a leading contender to host the 2026 World Cup, possibly with a joint bid involving at least two out of the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Gonzalez also said there was "a spirit" in the region in favour of holding a repeat of last year's Copa Centenario in 2020, but with 24 teams instead of 16.

The Copa Centenario, which celebrated the Copa America's 100th anniversary, was a special tournament in addition to the regular Copa America.

The Copa America is played every four years in the year following the World Cup and traditionally features 10 teams from CONMEBOL and two from CONCACAF.

The Centenario, however, took place in the United States and featured six teams from CONCACAF plus the 10 from South America.

CONCACAF also has its own biennial tournament, the Gold Cup, staged in odd-numbered years.

Gonzalez said officials were in favour of another extra tournament in 2020, with a similar make-up to the Centenario but under a different name and with the format increased to 24 teams.

"Obviously it wouldn't be called Centenario," said Gonzalez. "Our Copa America would continue to be played as usual."

Such a tournament may face opposition from European clubs, where many of the region's top players are based.



Dignitaries pose with members of the Bangladesh under-14 football team, which recently won the plate championship title of the Super Mokh Cup in Malaysia, at the Dhaka Club yesterday.

PHOTO: BFF

Booters' camp deferred

SPORTS REPORTER

A training camp of the national football team has been deferred by 10 days, due to the National Teams Committee's (NTC) failure to appoint a head coach ahead of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup, which is supposed to be held in Dhaka in March. The training camp was supposed to get underway today.

"We are going to defer the training camp for 10 days as we need time to select the national team coach who will be picked from local coaches. We also need time to fix our plan regarding the national team," said NTC member and BFF vice-president Tabith M Awal.

The national team, which had been without a coach since Bangladesh's Asian Cup qualifying defeat against Bhutan in October last year, was supposed to start the three-week camp, given that the Bangabandhu Gold Cup is held in March.

BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag earlier informed that they had short-listed three local coaches -- Maruful Haque, Saiful Bari Titu and Kamal Babu -- for the vacant position.

U-14 team's camp from February?

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) is working closely with the Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protishthan (BKSP) to ensure the under-14 football team is accommodated in the sports institute for a tenure of four years, claimed the federation's president Kazi Salahuddin yesterday.

The BFF boss was speaking at a reception organised for the under-14 team, which recently won plate championship title in Super Mokh Cup in Malaysia.

"The under-14 team will go to a residential camp in February and this residential camp will continue for 4 years. There is hunting going on apart from this team, from where the selected ones will be added to this team. A total of around 35 players will go to BKSP by the end of Feb. The number 30-35 will remain same while some of these players will drop out and new ones will get in," said the BFF boss after the reception.

The BFF president claimed that they are in continuous liaison with the BKSP about accommodating not only the under-14 team, but also the U-16 and U-18 boys teams as well as U-14 and U-16 girls teams for the four year tenure.

"We will have five to six teams in different BKSP facilities at the same time. I have a director of strategy, a trainer and a goalkeeping coach. They will formulate the programmes for these teams," said Salahuddin.

The players, officials and coaches of the under-14 team were each awarded Tk 20,000 each by Engineer Ghulam Mohammed Alamgir, chairman of the Max Group, the sponsors of the under-14 team.

State minister for youth and sports Biren Shikder MP, deputy minister Arif Khan Joy, BFF's senior vice-president Abdus Salam Murshedy, development committee chairman Badal Roy, other vice-presidents and senior officials of the federation, coaches, former and current footballers were present at the programme.



Chief guest Major General Jahangir Kabir Talukdar and the head of marketing and sales of KSRM, Commodore (ret'd) MS Kabir pose with the winners of the KSRM Golf Tournament 2017 at the Bhatary Golf and Country Club in Chittagong on Friday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Perisic brace powers Inter

AFP, Milan



Ivan Perisic scored twice including a late winner as Inter Milan began the New Year with a 2-1 comeback win at Udinese to move up to sixth in Serie A on Sunday.

Inter travelled north looking to secure their fourth consecutive win only to come up against a determined Udinese side that saw Seko Fofana test visiting goalkeeper Samir Handanovic with a vicious drive after just six minutes.

Despite the hosts taking a 17th-minute lead thanks to Jakub Jankto, Perisic goals on the stroke of half- and full-time moved Inter to within nine points of leaders Juventus, who host Bologna in Sunday's late game and also have a game in hand after missing their final fixture of the year due to Italian Super Cup commitments.

Inter are chasing a third-place finish and a return to the Champions League, and Handanovic told Sky Sport: "This is a signal to the rest of the league that we'll be fighting all the way."

"We knew it wouldn't be easy here, Udinese had taken 10 points from their last five games, but the goal just before half time gave us belief and we started the second half with a lot more conviction."

A mazy run by Samir had the Inter defence in disarray on 17 minutes and when Jankto ran on to the loose ball inside the area he beat Handanovic with an unstoppable shot.

Udinese should have built on their early lead but when Rodrigo De Paul sneaked between two defenders minutes later to meet a cutback from the byline he fired off the base of the post as the rooted Handanovic looked on.

Jankto almost had his second of the game soon after when he powered down the left, turned Jeison Murillo and fired a low angled strike just wide of the far post.

Udinese had the ball in the net again on 31 minutes when Duvan Zapata beat Handanovic from close range but the whistle had already blown for a foul by Frenchman Cyril Thereau as he skipped into the area.

Udinese lost momentum and were left lamenting spurning a series of half chances just before half time when Mauro Icardi coolly set up an unmarked Perisic to beat Orestis Karnezis inside the goalkeeper's near post seconds before the interval.

"Football matches are won by the team that scores the most goals and for that I have to compliment Inter," said Udinese coach Luigi Delneri. "We were perhaps a little naive at times, but I can't blame the lads. We played a good game."

Saif SC earn BPL spot

SPORTS REPORTER



Newcomers Saif Sporting Club qualified for the Bangladesh Premier League after beating Agrani Bank SRC 1-0 in their last match of the Bangladesh Championship League at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

With Fakirerpool Youngmen's Club confirming their Bangladesh Premier League berth in the penultimate round, the tie between Saif SC and Agrani Bank had turned into a decider for the second qualifying spot.

The sixth win pushed Saif SC to the top of the table with 26 points but Fakirerpool Youngmen Club still have a chance to finish on top when they take on bottom-placed Chittagong Mohammedan SC in their last fixture.

The defeat for Agrani Bank, meanwhile, meant they had to be content with third position with 20 points from 14 matches.

The match was entertaining as both teams played attacking football from the outset before Motin Mia struck the decisive goal in the 23rd minute.

Saif SC survived a few close calls as Agrani Bank were denied by the woodwork once while the Saif SC goalkeeper made a couple of brilliant saves.

BJMC, Ansar march on

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) and Bangladesh Ansar registered victories in their second round matches of the Exim Bank 27th National Women's Handball Championship at the Shaheed M Mansur Ali Stadium yesterday.

BJMC handed a 32-15 defeat to Bangladesh Police Handball Club while Bangladesh Ansar defeated Dhaka 24-8, said a press release.

In the day's first round matches, Dinapur beat Narail 17-15, Police thrashed Faridpur 15-2, Madaripur outplayed Jamalpur 9-4, Dhaka routed Naogaon 10-6 and Gopalganj thrashed Feni 12-3.



DS Igniters, the winners of The Daily Star Intra-Office Cricket Tournament, celebrate their triumph at the Residential Model School and College ground in Dhaka on Saturday. PHOTO: STRA