

SPORT



Abahani players practise at the MA Aziz Stadium in Chittagong yesterday. They will take on TC Sports Club of Maldives in the opening match of the Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup tournament today.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

No clear favourites Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup begins today

ANISUR RAHMAN from Chittagong

The Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup tournament is all set to get underway today at the MA Aziz Stadium in Chittagong with no clear favourites emerging from among the eight teams in the tournament. Although the second edition has lost a bit of shine in the absence of Indian clubs, the inclusion of two teams from Kyrgyzstan, South Korea and Maldives has strengthened the title race among the eight teams from six nations. The team from Afghanistan is also comparable to other teams but the main focus will be on defending champions Chittagong Abahani, Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani and FC Alga of Kyrgyzstan as Pocheon Citizen FC, a third-tier league South Korean team, has come with a young squad similar to Maldives Premier League runners-up TC Sports Club, who have brought 12 teenagers along with three national players and three foreign players. Five-time Kyrgyz Premier League champions FC Alga -- who held Sheikh Jamal to a 1-1 draw in their AFC Cup Play-off Qualifiers in 2015 and finished behind the Dhanmondi-

based club by virtue of goal difference -- are tipped as one of the favourites, while Dhaka Abahani and Chittagong Abahani are considered two of the others. "I think the tournament is going to be a tough one because the participating teams are expected to be strong and we can only speak about who are favourites after a few games are played," FC Alga's head of delegation Emil Busurmankulov said after practice at the Shaheed Eng Shamsuzzaman Stadium in Bondor. Emil also informed that it would be FC Alga's third international tournament after their participation in the AFC Cup Play-off Qualifiers twice in 2015 and 2016 and that their squad has five national players but no foreign players. As in previous editions, Dhaka Abahani are thought to be one of the title contenders following their domestic success and with a squad that has been together for nearly two years being bolstered by the inclusion of Sheikh Jamal striker Emeka Darlington and defender Yeasin Khan and Muktiyoddha Sangsad midfielder Simon Ezeodika, their hopes of making the final have been brightened, although their experience in the last edition was not good. "I am optimistic about the quality of the players we have and I would like to win the

title here because we are the league champions and we have a lot of national players," said Dhaka Abahani coach Drago Mamc before the start of training at the MA Aziz Stadium. "The teams who have come here from other countries are surely good teams. I have checked and there are no easy team," added the Croatian who believes a good start against TC Sport Club today is very important for them. Hosts Chittagong Abahani had not been favourites in the inaugural edition as their team mostly comprised of hired players, but they surprised all and sundry to win the title. However, despite forming a strong squad which won the Independence Cup and became runners-up in the Premier Football League, the Sky Blues seemingly lack the confidence to repeat the feat with key senior players Mamunul Islam and Zahid Hossain not in great shape and the local players having to play with a new set of foreign players this time. "I can't provide the exact information about Chittagong Abahani until one game is played. As defending champions we are also favourites but FC Alga and Dhaka Abahani are also favourites on paper," said Chittagong Abahani coach Saiful Bari Titu over the phone.

Tigers to play 100th Test at the P Sara

Bangladesh's SL tour dates announced

SPORTS REPORTER



Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) and Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) have announced the itinerary of the Bangladesh cricket team's tour of Sri Lanka, which will start with a two-day warm-up match on March 2 and lead into two Tests, three ODIs, and two T20Is, according to a BCB press release.

The first Test against Sri Lanka will take place from March 7 in Galle. The second Test, slated to start at the P Sara Oval in Colombo on March 15, will also be Bangladesh's 100th Test match. There will then be a one-day warm-up match in Colombo on March 22, followed by the first two ODIs in Dambulla on March 25 and 28, before the last ODI takes place in Colombo on April 1. The two T20Is will be held in Colombo on April 4 and April 6. The Tigers will start a fitness camp in Mirpur on February 24, and are scheduled to leave for Colombo on February 27. The national selectors are expected to

announce the Test squad by February 22. Besides selecting the national team, the selectors are also busy finalising the squad for the Emerging Cup Cricket tournament which will be held in Bangladesh from March 15. Under-23 teams from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, UAE, Nepal, Afghanistan and Hong Kong will participate with each team allowed a maximum of four national players.

TOUR ITINERARY

- March 2-3:** Two-day warm-up match, Moratuwa Cricket Stadium
- March 7-11:** First Test, Galle International Stadium
- March 15-19:** Second Test, P Sara International Stadium
- March 22:** One-day warm-up match, Colombo International Stadium (D/N)
- March 25:** First ODI, Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium (D/N)
- March 28:** Second ODI, Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium (D/N)
- April 1:** Third ODI, Sinhalese Sports Club
- April 4:** First T20I, R Premadasa International Stadium
- April 6:** Second T20I, R Premadasa International Stadium

'Have to bowl well to win my place back'

SPORTS REPORTER



Rubel Hossain turned in a relatively creditable performance during Bangladesh's tour of New Zealand earlier this year, bowling with fire in the second Test and taking the most wickets during the three T20Is, but he found himself out of the Test squad for the recently concluded one-off Test in India.

However, he has been using his time away from the national side wisely, turning out for South Zone in the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL), the premier four-day league in Bangladesh. "I am not thinking about it [not being in the national team] as it is completely up to the selectors," said the fast bowler during South Zone's practice session in Mirpur yesterday. "I am playing BCL now and my aim is to bowl well here and take wickets. The selectors are going to the matches; they will see how everyone is faring. It is completely up to them. Of course, if I do get a chance I will try to take full advantage of it. "Of course it feels bad. I have been in the national team for quite some time; I wasn't there

for some time in between. It is very painful to see the national team's matches sitting on the outside. I have to bowl well again and make my place in the national team," said a determined Rubel. And he has been doing that. The right-arm quick picked up a five-for in the second-round match against East Zone which South Zone won. A draw in the next game against the underperforming Central Zone, however, left South Zone in third place in the four-team table with a tough task coming up tomorrow -- taking on league leaders North Zone in the fourth-round match. "The opposition [North Zone] are in number one spot; they are of course a good team," Rubel said. "Now there are three to four national players in our team. We will of course play to win the next match. This match is very important for us. We have to win and we have to play good cricket. If each of us can play according to our reputations then we can hope for a good result. "All in all, our performance has been good. But if the national players could have played their best cricket then it could have been better. Even then, I think it is alright. Our batting has to improve a little bit more. Our bowling line-up is very good."



RUBEL HOSSAIN

REST OF THE CONTENDERS

POCHEON CITIZEN FC

Pocheon Citizen FC are a club in South Korea's third-tier. They have been playing in the K3 League since 2009 after their establishment in 2008. They have become champions thrice in that league where a total of 21 teams compete each season. It is the first time in club history that they have crossed their borders to take part in an international tournament. Pocheon Citizen are a semi-professional team but they have two players who have represented Korea for their under-23 team. "We have come here to win the trophy," said club secretary Lee Kwang Deok. "We don't have any idea about other teams but I think Dhaka Abahani and Chittagong Abahani are favourites in the tournament."

TRUST & CARE SPORTS CLUB

Coach Mohammad Nizam is the star of TC Sports Club of Maldives as the former national defender helped guide the side to the Maldives Premier League in 2014 and has helped them become runners-up in 2015 and 2016. TC have brought a youthful squad that comprises of 12 players of the under-19 team and three current national players, one former national player and three foreign players from Nepal, Egypt and Saint Vincent. It is also their first international tournament. "We have come here as part of our pre-season preparations as we are confident of winning the title because no one expected that we would become runners-up in the domestic league," said Nizam, who has been coaching for 14 years, including four years with TC.

MANANG MARSHYANGDI CLUB

Seven-time national league champions MMC are one of the oldest clubs in Nepal and they have come here after winning three

domestic titles -- Far-west Khaptad Gold Cup, Aaha-Rara Gold Cup and Jhapa Gold Cup. Their target is to win the international trophy in Chittagong. They have also played other international tournaments under AFC such as the Asian Club Cup Championship and AFC President's Cup. "Our recent successes in the domestic circuit prove that we are one of the strongest clubs at present. And as we have a majority of national players in our team, we are hopeful of getting success here," said coach Chhiring Lopsang Gurung.

SHAHEEN ASMAYEE FC

Shaheen Asmayee was established in 2012 during the introduction of the eight-team Afghan Premier League. They have become champions in the league thrice, including in the last season. Although it is their first-ever international tournament, they have taken it as part of their their preparations for the upcoming AFC Cup. Shaheen Asmayee came here without their foreign recruitments but brought along five national players who are believed to be their main strength. "We are just trying to develop our football in war-torn Afghanistan. Our club has come to this stage within five years and we have come here to get international experience, but I would like to win the title," said captain Amiruddin Sharifi.

DHAKA MOHAMMEDAN SC

Dhaka Mohammedan surprisingly reached the semifinals of the last edition with a depleted squad and they are not in a very different situation this time either. Having finished tenth in the Bangladesh Premier League, the Black and Whites have assembled their squad with players from eight clubs to compete in the tournament and they will be hoping to repeat their heroics in the last edition.

5-star Tahir spins SA to win

AFP, Auckland



Veteran spinner Imran Tahir was the destroyer as South Africa began their tour of New Zealand with an emphatic 78-run victory over the Black Caps in a one-off Twenty20 on Friday. Tahir claimed five wickets as the Proteas skittled New Zealand for 107 with five overs to spare after batting first and scoring 185 for six in their 20 overs. "It's a very special feeling," Tahir said after his man-of-the-match

performance at Eden Park, only the third five-wicket haul by a South African in a T20 international. Pacerman Andile Phehlukwayo also claimed three wickets and opening bat Hashim Amla scored 62 in a match that South Africa utterly dominated. New Zealand captain Kane Williamson conceded his team was outplayed and must improve with five one-dayers and three Tests against the Proteas looming. "It's frustrating from our perspective, we didn't really fire a shot," he said. "It's important we learn from this

and move on." After losing the toss, South Africa made a flying start with the bat then backed it up with a strong bowling performance. Amla made the most of Eden Park's short boundaries to smash 62 off 43 balls, receiving support from skipper Faf du Plessis (36) and JP Duminy (29). They looked set to make 200-plus but Trent Boult and Colin de Grandhomme put the brakes on with two wickets apiece. Boult was the one standout for New Zealand, conceding only eight runs in his four overs. But with dangerman Martin Guptill injured and Ross Taylor controversially omitted from the T20 side, the Black Caps woes with the bat were apparent. Chris Morris made a perfect start with two wickets in his first two balls for South Africa, coaxing an edge of debutant Glen Mitchell then skittling Colin Munro with his next ball. Phehlukwayo then took Williamson's wicket with a short delivery and dismissed Corey Anderson in his next over. Not to be outdone, Tahir dispatched Tom Bruce (33) and Luke Ronchi (0) in successive deliveries, before wrapping up the tail. The first one-dayer will be played in Hamilton on Friday.



South Africa leg-spinner Imran Tahir destroyed New Zealand with figures of five for 24 in a one-off T20I at Eden Park yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

India humble Tigresses

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh women's cricket team hit a brick wall in the form of their Indian counterparts yesterday as they were comprehensively beaten by nine wickets in their ICC Women's World Cup Qualifier Super Six match in Colombo. After being asked to bat first, the Tigresses could only muster 155 for eight in 50 overs, as the Indian bowlers, particularly pacer Mansi Joshi (3-25) and leg-spinner Devika Vaidya (2-17), cast their stingy spell. Fargana Hoque continued her good form with 50 off 107 deliveries and Sharmin Akhter scored an 82-ball 35, but the pace of scoring was too slow to put up a challenging total. In reply, India eclipsed the total in 33.3 overs for the loss of opener Deepti Sharma, who was caught and bowled by Khadija Tul Kubra. Mona Meshram hit an unbeaten 78 off 92 balls while Mithali Raj was not out on an 87-ball 73. Bangladesh are now fifth on the six-team table and their next match is against Sri Lanka on Sunday.

SCORES IN BRIEF
BANGLADESH: 150 for 8 in 50 overs (Sharmin 35, Fargana 50, Rumana 11, Nigar 18, Salma 14; Mansi 3-25, Vaidya 2-17)
INDIA: 158 for 1 in 33.3 overs (Meshram 78 not out, Mithali 73 not out; Khadija 1-37)
Result: India women won by 9 wickets.
Player-of-the-match: Mona Meshram.