



Bangladesh skipper for shorter versions Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (L) and Test skipper Mushfiquir Rahim smile in satisfaction upon the team's return to Dhaka yesterday morning after a month-long tour of Sri Lanka.

PHOTO:
FIROZ AHMED

A happy homecoming

Hassan says Mash didn't retire from T20Is!

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh national cricket team touched down at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport early yesterday morning after wrapping up a fantastic tour of Sri Lanka.

The tour will be remembered for a plethora of reasons: a magnificent win in the Tigers' 100th Test, the inspirational Mashrafe Bin Mortaza calling time on his T20I career, and the visitors' dominant performances away from home in all formats of the game.

The Tigers came away from the 31-day tour with a sparkling record: 1-1 draws in the Test, ODI and T20I series.

As the players emerged from the airport, media personnel flocked to Mashrafe, who chose to speak about his team's performances before having the focus turned to himself.

"We played a very good series in Sri Lanka for the first time. The only feeling of unfulfillment from this tour was not winning the ODI series," the 34-year-old said. "We bounced back very strongly in the Test series despite being 1-0 down. We should have won the ODI series 2-0. And we came back from 1-0 down to draw the T20 series. Overall I think we have had a wonderful tour."

When asked about his thoughts on a 10-year T20I career, Mashrafe said: "I don't have any discontent about my T20 career. I think it is a matter of pride for my family that I have been able to play T20s for the past 10 years. For that reason, I am proud."

Test captain Mushfiquir Rahim was also beaming after leading the visitors to a magnificent centenary Test win.

"This year we have most of our games on foreign soil and our target was to do well away from home. We played well in New Zealand and India, but we did not get results," Mushfiquir began.

"We were poor in the first Test [against Sri Lanka], but the way we came back in the second Test was unbelievable. This is proof that we are improving in Test cricket with each passing day. Other than that, we also needed to show on the world stage that we can do well in Tests abroad."

Mushfiquir also had his attention turned to Mashrafe, and was asked whether the braveheart's departure would affect the team.

"Of course [it will]. He is not only a player, but also a guardian. The contribution which Mashrafe bhai has left is something that no one else can fill," was the Test skipper's assessment.

Bangladesh Cricket Board president Nazmul Hassan also spoke. He was a bit taken back by the entire hubbub surrounding Mashrafe's retirement, saying that no other country paid so much attention when a player left the shortest format of the game. He then made a bewildering statement of his own, saying that despite retiring, Mashrafe would continue to feature in the T20I side if needed.

"I have been telling you that Mashrafe has not left T20s yet. We haven't said that Mashrafe is not in the [T20] squad. He has only left captaincy. We will have three captains in three formats, I have said that from the start," Hassan said.

"If he doesn't want to play but we need him, will

O'Keefe fined

AFP, Sydney

Australian Test star Stephen O'Keefe has been fined Aus\$20,000 (US\$15,000) for making "highly inappropriate" comments while drunk during a cricket function and ordered to undergo counselling, authorities said Friday.

The spinner, one of the best bowlers during Australia's recent four-Test series in India, was also banned from playing in the Australian one-day domestic competition this year.

It is the second time the 32-year-old has been in alcohol-fuelled trouble, after being fined last year for offensive conduct at a Sydney hotel.

"There is no time or place for unacceptable behaviour from any of our players in Australian cricket, and we continue to take a zero-tolerance approach to this," said Cricket Australia team performance general manager Pat Howard.

"We're extremely disappointed this situation occurred, particularly on the back of a previous incident, and it now overshadows Stephen's on field performance on the recent tour of India."

O'Keefe said he accepted the fine and would undergo "specialist counselling" as demanded.

Dhoni warned

AGENCIES, New Delhi

Looks like Rising Pune Supergiant wicketkeeper MS Dhoni has had to pay the price for jokingly signalling for a review after Imran Tahir struck Mumbai Indians all-rounder Kieron Pollard on the pads during the second game of the IPL in Pune on Thursday.

Match referee Manu Nayyar seems to have not taken the joke nicely and the former India skipper has been reprimanded for breaching the IPL Code of Conduct.

According to a statement issued by BCCI, Dhoni admitted to the Level 1 offence (Article 2.1.1) for conduct that is contrary to the spirit of the game. It further said that in case of Level 1 breaches of the IPL Code of Conduct, the match referee's decision is final and binding.

Tigers learn the art of the fightback

SAKEB SUBHAN from Colombo



When the tour of Sri Lanka started, 1-1 draws in each of the three formats, which Bangladesh achieved by winning the second of the two T20Is on Thursday, would have seemed like a highly optimistic forecast.

Yet, after a total of 15 days of cricket and countless hours of practice squeezed into 31 days starting with the first Test in Galle from March 7 till this Thursday, Bangladesh have walked away with a share of the spoils in every format -- an achievement worth writing home about on a tour of Sri Lanka, one of the more difficult assignments in world cricket, not least because of the heat which was particularly sapping on this tour.

With the acclimatisation and conditioning challenges that touring sides encounter in contrast to the familiarised home team, three series split down the middle would ordinarily point to a moral victory for the visitors. However, in this case the second ODI being washed out after Sri Lanka scored 311 in Dambulla on March 28 -- no team has successfully chased more than 300 in Sri Lanka -- will leave a question mark over the outcome of the ODI series, especially after the way Bangladesh folded in the third ODI when chasing 281. Speculation about that match will rage on as long as there are cricket fans on both sides.

THE GALLE HUMILIATION AND THE AWAKENING

But what it says in the books is Bangladesh fought back from a terrible performance in the crushing 259-run defeat in Galle, when five wickets were surrendered in the first hour of the fifth day, to win a first-ever Test against Sri Lanka at the P Sara Oval in Colombo, which also happened to be their 100th Test. They then continued their momentum to win the first ODI by 90 runs with a perfect performance.

If there is one term that can be affixed to this tour, it is body language. After the first ODI, coach Chandika Hathurusingha said that the biggest change he noticed since the first Test was in body language. It was the humiliation in Galle, one in a long line of



Mushfiquir Rahim (C) leads the team off after a comprehensive victory in Bangladesh's 100th Test in Colombo.

PHOTO: AFP FILE

fifth-day surrenders this season that made the team close ranks and look within. In an age where the coach and backroom staff often do the thinking for the players, the Galle humiliation forced Mushfiquir Rahim and his men to start a custom of players-only meetings before each match, and the results were there to see from P Sara and beyond -- particularly in the field.

"[Closed door meeting among only the players] makes a difference although we didn't do it today," said Shakib Al Hasan after the second T20I was won by 45 runs. "I think we should do it whenever we need to. It helps because many players can air their feelings freely. People feel lighter, and we have seen that it helps us on the field."

Whereas previous tours and series had their supporters bemoaning missed chances, Bangladesh consistently and comfortably outperformed their opponents on the field, with the exception of the third ODI when Sri Lanka's effort just about exceeded Bangladesh's sustained brilliance. The few catches that were

dropped were off very difficult opportunities, with the exception of Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's drop off Upul Tharanga in the second T20I.

The results of the body language uptick had a more profound effect -- the will to fight not just between matches but within them. Even in the third ODI, which after the Galle debacle was Bangladesh's second-worst result on tour, the bowlers and fielders fought back after leaking 76 runs in the first 10 overs to concede just 204 runs in the next 40.

But it is the will to fight back from setbacks in results that will be the takeaway from this tour, and it was in plentiful evidence at both ends of the tour. In the Tests they had to contend with someone like Rangana Herath, the best fifth-day bowler in the world who had just obliterated them in Galle, to chase a tricky 191-run target on the fifth day. Other than a few post-tea jitters when the target was within touching distance, Bangladesh passed with flying colours.

In the T20Is, they had to face the threat that is Lasith Malinga, who bowled his yorkers with real venom in Sri Lanka's six-wicket victory on Tuesday. In the next match on Thursday, far from being cowed by the threat and emboldened by the desire to give outgoing captain Mashrafe a winning send-off, they actually went after Malinga, particularly Soumya Sarkar, who seems to be truly rediscovering the form that made him a sensation in 2015's home successes. Malinga did come back with his fourth international hat-trick late in the innings, but that just limited the damage done to Sri Lanka.

WINDS OF CHANGE

This tour was not without its moments of turmoil. Mahmudullah, after a prolonged lean patch that made him a virtual walking wicket to short balls and swinging deliveries in Tests, was dropped from the second Test and there was a ridiculous to-ing and

fro-ing about sending the senior batsman home for the duration of Bangladesh's 100th Test, with the uncertainty being generated mostly by the Bangladesh Cricket Board president with the first of his numerous instances of micro-management on this tour.

Established number three batsman Mominul Haque was another, if much more inconspicuous, exclusion from the Test squad. Unlike Mahmudullah however, Mominul cannot stake his claims in other formats so it will fall upon the coach and the team management to see to it that a batsman who averages in the high forties in Tests does not fall by the wayside.

The most high-profile of the changes however was the retirement of Mashrafe from T20Is. More than his retirement -- a change that was in the offing as he will likely not be there to lead the team in the next World T20 -- it was the nature of the announcement that has raised eyebrows. An unselfish cricketer like Mashrafe announced his retirement at the toss of the first T20I, thereby making the series all about his exit. The behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings that led to Mashrafe making the announcement in such a way will likely be one of the unknowns from this tour that may come to light later.

Overall, it has been a positive 31 days for Bangladesh, and their best away tour till date.

"We played with more freedom in the second T20, compared to the first game. I think it is a positive sign. We have to play like this in T20s. We made huge improvements in the Test series, after losing the first game. In ODIs, we showed the consistency of the last couple of years. We didn't bat well in the third ODI, but overall we had a mindset change in Tests and T20s. We don't often win like this abroad," said Shakib on Thursday.

They have not won like this often away, till this tour. Their fans will hope that this was the first instance of a rising curve.

Afghanistan's Lord's debut against MCC

AFP, London

Afghanistan are set for another milestone after it was announced Friday they will play their first match at Lord's, taking on a side led by former New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum.

Now one of the world's leading associate, or junior cricket, countries Afghanistan are closing in on becoming a Test match nation.

They are top of the International Cricket Council's Intercontinental Cup standings, with the winner set to gain Test status next year.

Their 50-over match against MCC at Lord's, "the home of cricket", will take place on July 11.

Two Afghan players, Mohammad Nabi and Hamid Hassan, were previously on the MCC Young Cricketers scheme.

MCC president Matthew Fleming said: "I am thrilled that we will be welcoming Afghanistan to Lord's this summer. I have seen first-hand the talent and passion for cricket the nation has and this fixture can only be a good thing for the ongoing development of Afghan cricket."

Virat & I still good friends: Warner

PTI, Hyderabad

David Warner says he remains good friends with Virat Kohli despite a bitterly fought Test series which ended with the Indian captain saying that he was no more friends with the Australian cricketers.

Warner had a chat with Kohli during the IPL inaugural ceremony here.

"Ya. I had a chat with Virat. We are still friends, thankfully. I had a text conversation with him which is very nice of him," said Warner.

"As we all know, we all got jobs to do. You guys (journalists) write, right or wrong. We players...that's how the game is. But, away from this, we are still very good friends," the Sunrisers Hyderabad captain.

Against the backdrop of sparks flying during the recent tour of Australia to India, Warner was asked whether he got a chance to have a chat with Kohli.