

Riyad back in Test fold, Nasir axed

SPORTS REPORTER



Mahmudullah made a comeback to the Test squad for the upcoming two-match series against

South Africa starting from September 28 as the selectors yesterday named a 15-man squad that also saw the re-inclusion of pacers Rubel Hossain and Subhasish Roy among the five seamers to strengthen the fast bowling department keeping South Africa's bouncy pitches in mind.

Shakib Al Hasan, who asked for a break from Test cricket, was also granted leave for the South Africa Tests, but according to chief selector Minhajul Abedin the all-rounder can join the side for the second Test if he so wishes.

Minhajul said that it's always difficult to form the team without Shakib, but also added that they respect the request as Shakib has been playing cricket continuously for a long time.

"Obviously it's difficult for us to make a team without him as we always prefer to have Shakib, being the best all-rounder in the world. At the same time we also have to think about his mental aspect and being a former player I know how difficult it is to perform your best when you are not mentally fit. From that point of view we should also respect his decision," said Minhajul at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. The selectors have opted to retain Taijul Islam in the squad as a

replacement for Shakib.

Meanwhile, Nasir Hossain was also excluded from the squad after his below-par performances in the recently concluded series against Australia.

Mahmudullah, who played his last Test against Sri Lanka in Galle earlier this year, was dropped from the prestigious 100th Test that followed after a string of low scores. The 33-Test veteran will certainly add some experience in the line-up in Shakib's absence.

Bangladesh head coach Chandika Hathurusingha had earlier said that Mahmudullah will have to wait for his Test chance despite his magnificent century against New Zealand in the ICC Champions Trophy this year.

"It was my decision to include Mahmudullah in the squad for his ability to play well on bouncy pitches; we have seen that he batted well

in England. I am hopeful that he will be able to perform well with the way he has been batting recently," he said.

The selectors also backed Soumya Sarkar and Imrul Kayes, mainly for the lack of options, despite their failures against Australia.

"We have kept Imrul as we know it will be a challenging tour in South Africa and there will be a huge difference from what we encountered against Australia at home. We did not want to put his [Imrul's] career at risk and kept our faith in him as he is an experienced campaigner and we will have our eyes on him, hoping that he will score runs," Minhajul added.



Mahmudullah Riyad, who played his last Test against Sri Lanka in Galle earlier this year, was recalled yesterday for the South Africa Tests.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

Competition the mantra as NCL set for Sept 15 start

Mashrafe to play early rounds

SPORTS REPORTER

Since introducing the two-tier system in the 17th edition to increase the competition among the players in the National Cricket League two years ago, the Bangladesh Cricket Board is yet to see the results as the 19th edition of the NCL will start from September 15.

Bangladesh ODI captain will participate in the early rounds for Khulna Division in order to be match-fit for the ODI leg of the South Africa tour.

The two-tier system will continue this season with Rangpur Division -- promoted last season -- taking part in tier one while Dhaka Metropolis will feature in the lower tier after being demoted last year when Khulna clinched the title.

"We are yet to achieve what we

expected by introducing the two-tier system as this is a very important tournament for the players to get into the national team. There is a huge opportunity for a player when he plays longer version cricket where the batsman can bat for longer periods and the bowlers can bowl more. So from that point of view we expected, by introducing the two-tier system, the teams to show more interest to have a competitive tournament [in order to move up a tier or stay off demolition]. But still, it's getting better and I think it will take some more time," said Akram Khan, chairman of BCB's cricket operations committee during a press conference at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

The tournament will be played across five venues on a home-and-away basis this season, with no games scheduled in Dhaka. The BCB have increased the match fee from Tk 25,000 to Tk 35,000,

travel allowance from Tk 2,000 to Tk 2,500 and the daily allowance from Tk 1,000 to 1,500.

During the first Test against Australia in late August, Bangladesh opener Tamim Iqbal urged the board to prepare some pitches that more closely reflect the spinning surfaces for the home Tests.

"You can see there will be no games in Dhaka this season as there are a lot of matches played in Dhaka, including internationals and other schedules. At the same time if we want to prepare such wickets it also requires some rest to the pitch, so keeping these things in mind we have decided to hold the tournament outside Dhaka. Before the Australia series we had a meeting with the curators and briefed them to prepare sporting wickets where the bowlers can get wickets and the batsman will have to work hard to score runs," he said.

It's more than a game: Faf

World XI-Pakistan first T20I today

AFP, Lahore

A World XI squad comprising 13 players from seven top cricket-playing nations landed in Lahore early Monday amid massive security, with Pakistan hoping the tour will end years of international isolation.

Officials have said there will be "fool-proof" security for the three-match Twenty20I series starting Tuesday in Lahore. The World XI's tour of Pakistan is more than just a game, captain Faf du Plessis and coach Andy Flower said.

South Africa's du Plessis told reporters in Lahore it was a "huge honour" to be playing

the highest-profile event in cricket-mad Pakistan since a militant attack on the Sri Lankan team bus in 2009.

Pakistan have not hosted top-level international cricket -- barring five limited-over matches against minnows Zimbabwe in 2015 -- since that attack, which killed eight people and injured seven players and staff.

"It's not every day you get an opportunity to play in something that is much more than just about yourself and your own team or your own country," du Plessis said.

World XI coach Andy Flower, who toured Pakistan in 1993, 1996 and 1998 with Zimbabwe, said he and his team were "privileged" to be there.

"We, as the World XI, would also like to offer our sympathy and condolences to all those who have lost their loved ones in terrorist acts in Pakistan," he said.

"These cricketers are here to play their part in the safe and steady return of international cricket in Pakistan, so that the enthusiastic and diehard fans and followers of Pakistan cricket can once again start watching their stars in their own backyard."

Du Plessis said he was confident in the security arrangements.

"You do think about that sort of thing but as soon as we spoke to the people who were in control of the security... as a player all you want was that peace of mind and they gave it to us."

A wake-up call for BCB

BISHWAJIT ROY



The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) partially assented to Shakib Al Hasan's plea for a break from Test cricket, and as a result the selectors announced a 15-member Test squad for the upcoming South Africa tour sans the ace all-rounder.

The 30-year-old top-ranked all-rounder in the world has missed only seven Tests since his debut against India in May 2007 at Chittagong but the previous reasons were different from the latest one as he has asked the BCB for a six-month break from Test cricket.

This request for a break from the national team breaks new ground for the country's cricketers as well as for the people who run the game.

It is needless to say how important he is to the team. For his batting and bowling and just reflect on his exceptional fielding; his brilliant direct hit to send Peter Handscomb packing at a crucial moment in the recent Chittagong Test against Australia should still be fresh in the minds of cricket fans.

Therefore, it is almost impossible to replace the 'three-in-one' man in the side. Above everything else his presence in the dressing room and on the field will be acutely missed in the Test series against South Africa.

That is of course not to say that his decision should not be respected, even applauded. If a player feels that his body and mind does not speak in favour of giving hundred per cent and takes the step that Shakib has, you can only see it as the decision of a true professional. If he wants to spend more time with his beloved family, then one should respect that.

It should also be easy to appreciate the toll that the schedule of the world game can take on a player like Shakib, who not only has international commitments but is also an advertisement for Bangladesh cricket in T20 leagues the world over.

Cynics may also ask whether Shakib has become the latest victim of T20 cricket, that he is sacrificing Test cricket rather than limited-overs cricket. Even if that view is correct, there is not much blame to be assigned because the player in question has given 10 years of service with utmost sincerity in all three formats. At least he is forthright and will not compromise with the effort



Bangladesh Test captain Mushfiqur Rahim (R) will miss the reassuring presence of Shakib Al Hasan during the two-Test series in South Africa starting later this month.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

he puts in.

So, it would also not be a surprise if Shakib decides in the near future that he will not continue in Test cricket.

The bigger question is whether the game's governing body is ready to take

such decisions in a positive manner. As Shakib's request came as a new experience to the officials, they might not have responded in the proper way as they offered the cricketer a break for only the Test series in South Africa when Shakib desired a six-month break. Even this allowance was tempered yesterday with the proviso that Shakib could join the squad for the second Test as the 16th member if he wished, an ad-hoc condition that can only increase the pressure on Shakib. The request should instead be a wake-up call for BCB, especially when they think about the future of Bangladesh cricket without the current core group.

The recent success of Bangladesh cricket has mostly been the outcome of the coming of age of a highly talented generation of cricketers who came through a process, and Shakib is one of the most important members of this group. The BCB must think whether everything is in place to continue Bangladesh's upward graph without the presence of any key cricketer. Can they maintain or strengthen that process which helped cricketers like Shakib and Mushfiqur Rahim to fulfil their talents?

So it is not only a question of how the team management can minimise the impact of the absence of a player like Shakib in trying conditions like in South Africa, but also how the board react to this new phenomenon.

'Will miss Shakib badly'

MAZHAR UDDIN

This will be the first time that Shakib Al Hasan will not be a part of the Test team since the 2014 series in West Indies when he was serving a six-month suspension because of disciplinary issues.

Interestingly, despite being in superb form, scoring 665 runs and picking up 29 wickets in his last seven Tests, the all-rounder has asked for a break of six months from Test cricket, which the BCB partially granted by excusing him from the two-Test series in South Africa.

The 30-year-old has been instrumental in Bangladesh's recent longer-version successes, be it the drawn series against England last year, his century in the victory in the 100th Test in Sri Lanka and his stellar all-round show in the recent maiden Test win over

Australia.

According to Mushfiqur Rahim it is not good news for him as captain of the Test side and informed that the premier all-rounder's absence in the team will certainly create a gap in all three departments on their upcoming challenging tour of South Africa.

"Obviously I am not happy, being the captain of the side," Mushfiqur told The Daily Star yesterday. "But as he asked for a break to have some rest from his workload, that's his personal decision which I also respect. At the same time, if he was injured we would have had to play without him, so that's part of life," he added.

Shakib, who has played 51 Tests, scored 3,594 runs and picked up 188 wickets was instrumental both with bat and ball when Bangladesh

last toured South Africa for a two-match Test series back in 2008 when he picked up 11 wickets and scored 118 runs.

However, Mushfiqur thought that the return of Mahmudullah Riyad, who was recalled to the Test side after being left out of the 100th Test in Sri Lanka, will certainly add some experience to the Bangladesh line-up.

"The inclusion of Riyad Bhai will add some experience to our side as he is a very seasoned campaigner for us. But still I would say Shakib is Shakib, and we are going to miss him badly," Mushfiqur said.

The Tigers Test skipper also informed that the South Africa tour will be a challenging one for Bangladesh, and opined that the players will have to show their character in the testing conditions.

Abahani pile misery on Muktijoddha

SPORTS REPORTER

Nasiruddin Chowdhury and Landing Darboe scored in the second half as defending champions Abahani beat Muktijoddha Sangsad 2-0 to move to third position in the Bangladesh Premier League table yesterday.

After a barren first half, where the five-time champions wasted a number of opportunities, the two

goals gave the Sky Blues a much-needed victory as they moved to 17 points, five behind league leaders Chittagong Abahani. Muktijoddha, on the other hand, remained in ninth position with six points, thanks to their sixth defeat in eight games.



Abahani's Nasiruddin Chowdhury (L) celebrates the opening goal against Muktijoddha Sangsad during their Bangladesh Premier League encounter at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR