



The Dasarath Rangasala in Kathmandu, which turned into a heap of rubble following the devastating earthquake in 2015, has been rebuilt from scratch just in time to host the opening ceremony of the 13th South Asian Games as well as the football and athletics events.

PHOTO: ATIQUE ANAM

# Bangladesh looking for a better show Booters gearing up

ATIQUE ANAM from Kathmandu

Bangladesh will field a 462-member team of athletes in the 13th South Asian Games starting in Kathmandu today, hoping to better their dismal performance from the previous edition three years ago.

In the 2016 edition held in Guwahati and Shillong, Bangladesh finished fifth among eight countries -- Afghanistan were part of the South Asian Olympic Committee at that time -- with 75 medals, including only four gold medals.

Swimmer Mahfuza Khatun Shila's double-gold haul along with gold medals from weightlifter Mabiha Akter Simanta and shooter Shakil Ahmed barely saved face for the Red and Greens. But this time Bangladesh are expecting a much better medal-haul, partly due to better preparation but mostly owing to the absence of India and Pakistan in a number of major disciplines.

"We are not considering who are playing and who are not, but on our own, we are convinced that we can perform much better than the previous time. It's difficult to say how many gold medals we will target, but I hope we will get a double-digit of gold medals," Bangladesh contingent's chef de mission Asaduzzaman Kohinoor told reporters yesterday on the eve of the Games' opening in Kathmandu.

While swimmer Shila will only be carrying the national flag this time around, there are hopes of gold medals from quite a few individual events as well as team events.

Cricket is one of the team events that Bangladesh are pinning their hopes on. The country won the gold in medal in men's cricket, beating Sri Lanka in the final in 2010 in Dhaka, the only time cricket was featured in these regional games. This time again, with India and Pakistan not participating, Bangladesh will eye a gold medal and the main competition may come from Sri Lanka once again.

Bangladesh will field the High Performance team, featuring a number of national team players including

Soumya Sarkar and skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto, which recently finished second in the Emerging Teams Asia Cup where they beat Sri Lanka comfortably in group stages.

Bangladesh have a good opportunity to win a gold medal in women's cricket too where the near-full-strength national team could be challenged for the title by an under-23 team from Sri Lanka.

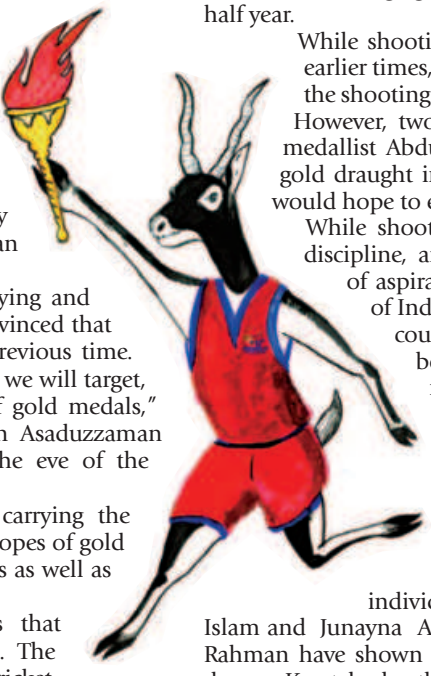
Football is another team event where Bangladesh could do really well, according to everyone concerned, with the continuous upward graph of performance of the senior team as well as age-group teams over the past one-and-a-half year.

While shooting used to bring a lot of medals in earlier times, there is not much conviction among the shooting officials regarding gold medal hopes. However, two-time Commonwealth Games gold medalist Abdullah Hel Baki will look to end his gold draught in these regional games while Shakil would hope to emulate his feat from the last time.

While shooting has faded as a medal-boosting discipline, archery has ascended as a discipline of aspiration for Bangladesh. In the absence of Indian archers due to suspension on the country from the game's world governing body, Bangladesh could lead the medal-haul in this discipline which offers 10 gold medals. Ruman Sana will be at the centre of attention as far as Bangladesh's archery hopes are concerned.

While swimming and athletics does not evoke too much faith for Bangladesh in recent times, individual performers like swimmers Ariful Islam and Junayna Ahmed and high-jumper Mahfuzur Rahman have shown enough evidence in recent times to dream. Karateka Brothers Hassan Khan Sun and Hossain Khan Moon could also bring glory like they did in 2010 while Taekwondo could produce a number of top medals, according to Bangladesh officials.

There is also hope that the new generation of amateur golfers could emulate the gold-rush ushered in by the likes of Dulal Hossain and Zamal Hossain Mollah nine years ago in Dhaka.



## Spikers face Pakistan in semis today

SPORTS REPORTER from Kathmandu

Bangladesh could confirm their first medal of the 13th Asian Games today when the men's volleyball team take on Pakistan in one of the two semifinals at the Tripureswar Covered Hall in Kathmandu.

Bangladesh have never won a medal in the volleyball event of the Games, but the team led by Horoshit Biswas have reached the semifinals, thanks to a five-set win over Nepal in their first match. Even though they lost to defending champions India in 3-0 sets, the Bangladesh captain is hoping for a good outcome against last edition's bronze medal winners.

"We came here with the target of reaching the semifinals. Now that we are through, anything can happen. Pakistan are a very strong side, but we are confident of putting up a fight. We'll have to be at our best," said the Bangladesh captain.

Pakistan beat last edition's beaten finalists Sri Lanka to emerge as group champions. Bangladesh coach Alipour Arozi conceded that Pakistan are way above Bangladesh in strength, but he did not rule out the possibility of an upset.

"India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are very strong, not only in this region but also in Asian volleyball. They have players with good height and physique, but we are very happy with the way we beat Nepal against the odds in front of their home crowd," the Iranian coach said.

## Mash returns to action

*Expected to be available from start of BBPL*

SPORTS REPORTER



Dhaka Platoon coach Mohammad Salahuddin yesterday said they were expecting Bangladesh's ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza to be available from the start of the Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League, banishing any concerns about the pacer's injury.

The 36-year-old bowled for the first time since injury in the Platoon nets at the BCB Academy ground yesterday and did not complain of any back pain. However, he did work with the physio after completing the bowling session.

Mashrafe played his last ODI against Pakistan in the World Cup in July this year and since then the inspirational cricketer, who normally plays only the fifty-over format, has remained out of action.

He missed the three-match ODI series in Sri Lanka in August after suffering an ankle injury during training a day before the tour. Mashrafe then suffered a groin injury in mid-November, hurting himself while batting against a bowling machine.

Mashrafe, who was spotted in Mirpur over the past couple of days, bowled his first deliveries since returning to Tamim Iqbal yesterday and Salahuddin believes it will not take long for him to regain confidence.

"There was no pain when he bowled and I think everything is fine. I think he will be available for the whole tournament and that is why we picked him. He bowled today after a long time. Maybe there will be some complications with regards to rhythm, but I think it will be fine after bowling for a few days. The biggest advantage is his experience. You can't overlook that aspect. So, when he will play, he will be at a hundred percent," Salahuddin told reporters yesterday.

The Platoons gave Mashrafe a lifeline when they picked up the four-time BPL winner in the fourth round of the players' draft as their second A+ category player after having grabbed Tamim earlier.

"He [Mashrafe] has not started practicing from today [yesterday]. He was trying for quite some time to regain fitness. No one has noticed that. He has lost weight and is trying to be fit," he added.



SPORTS REPORTER from Kathmandu



Despite having less than ideal preparation and facing troubles in Kathmandu, the Bangladesh football team are hoping to regain the supremacy of the South Asian Games, which will get underway in the capital of Nepal today.

The Bangladesh team came to Kathmandu on November 27 without having any local camp, and have faced logistical issues here in addition to the challenge of getting accustomed to the high altitude and cold. But the Bangladesh players and officials believe they have a great chance of winning the showpiece event for the third time in the Games' history.

"There are issues like no gym and swimming pool at the team hotel. But we will have to play four matches in five days, which leaves us with little time to do gym or swimming. So we are not seeing those as big issues; rather we are confident that we can do very well. If we can't do that, it will be a failure," team manager Satyajit Das Rupu said yesterday.

Bangladesh will start their campaign against Bhutan on Monday before facing Nepal, Maldives and Bhutan in round-robin format matches. In absence of India and with Nepal and Maldives not as good at the under-23 level, players feel the battle for the title could be between hosts Nepal and Bangladesh.

"I think Nepal will be our main competitors as they will play on their home ground and in front of their own supporters. But we are focused on the Bhutan match right now, and with two wins in the last two matches against them, we are confident of making a good start to the tournament," said striker Nabib Newaz Jibon, one of three senior players in the side with the other two being skipper Jamal Bhuiyan and defender Yeasin Khan.

The top two teams from the round-robin stage will play in the final, scheduled for December 10 at the Dasarath Rangasala.



Bangladesh ODI captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza returned to the nets for the first time since his injury yesterday and bowled four overs. He is expected to be fit from the start of the Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League.

PHOTO: COLLECTED