



A scarecrow created by Northwich Cricket Club members is pictured on the cricket field to represent an umpire on the planned day for the start of their cricket season, which has been postponed by the coronavirus pandemic.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Wuhan football team make emotional return

AFP, Shanghai



Wuhan Zall, the Chinese Super League team from the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic, made an emotional return to their home city after more than three months torn from their families.

Zall endured a turbulent 104 days on the road -- including being stranded in Spain -- because Wuhan was sealed off in January when the virus killed and infected thousands there.

The city is now emerging from its weeks-long lockdown and hundreds of chanting fans met the Zall players when they arrived at Wuhan's train station late Saturday, state media said.

Wearing masks, the players had bouquets of flowers thrust into their hands as supporters clad in the team's orange colours held banners and sang.

"After more than three months of wandering, the homesick Wuhan Zall team members finally set foot in their hometown," the team said on the Twitter-like Weibo.

The squad, led by their Spanish coach Jose Gonzalez, will now spend a few days at home before resuming training on Wednesday.

The squad's return home is the final chapter in a long saga.

They began training for the new



After spending 104 days away from home,Chinese Super League outfit Wuhan Zall made an emotional return to their home city and ground zero of the coronavirus pandemic. They arrived at the railway station in Wuhan on on Friday.

PHOTO:AFP

Chinese Super League season, since postponed indefinitely, in early January in the southern city of Guangzhou. They flew to Malaga, Spain towards the end of January, by which time the city of Wuhan and its 11 million people were under harsh restrictions because of the coronavirus outbreak.

"They are not walking viruses, they are athletes," Gonzalez told media at the time.

But when the virus began taking hold in Spain in March, Zall made arrangements to fly back to China, where the number of infections

was slowing markedly.

Wuhan was still sealed off so the squad, via a prolonged transit in Germany, flew to China's southern city of Shenzhen on March 16.

They went into three weeks of quarantine, followed by training in the nearby city of Foshan, before taking a high-speed train from Guangzhou to Wuhan on Saturday evening.

Zall are preparing for a season that still has no start date. The CSL was supposed to begin on February 22 but could now kick off in late June, according to latest reports.

Rahmatganj GS distributes food

SPORTS REPORTER

The general secretary of Rahmatganj MFS, Imtiaz Hamid Sabuj, has gone into home quarantine after distributing relief goods among 500 neighbours at Hazi Ballu Road in Rahmatganj area in Old Dhaka on Friday.

The sports organiser distributed 11 food items among round 500 middle-income families, following footsteps of players from different disciplines who have earlier come forward to help the under-privileged people.

"I know about the sufferings of families in my area, who have a monthly income of only around Tk15,000. That's why I took the initiative to distribute food among them," Sabuj told The Daily Star over phone.

"To prevent the spread of COVID-19, we all will have to come forward. I hope other financially solvent people take such initiatives. I also request everyone to follow government instructions of staying home and helping family members," Sabuj said, adding that he felt sick with fever after distributing food and went into home quarantine after discussing the matter with a physician.

MUSHY TO AUCTION FIRST DOUBLE-TON BAT

Mushfiquur Rahim will auction the bat that he used against Sri Lanka in 2013 to become first Bangladeshi to hit a double hundred in international cricket. The proceeds will be used to help the less privileged during the coronavirus crisis, local media reported. "I am going to put the bat I used to hit my first 200 up for auction. I am thinking of auctioning it digitally. Let's see what arrangements can be made. I will request everyone who can manage to come to the auction and bid a high price. The money is going to be used fully to help out the needy. I am asking everyone to raise the price as much as possible," Mushfiquur was quoted as saying by local media.

— STAR SPORT DESK



Hockey players hit hard

ANISUR RAHMAN



When some top national hockey players joined Bangladesh Navy in 2013, an argument over the justification of their joining the services team had made the rounds in the hockey fraternity.

The argument was that the national players can earn more from the Dhaka Premier League compared to what they would get from Bangladesh Navy. However, those players -- Rasel Mahmud Jimmy, Mamunur Rahman Chayan, Imran Hasan Pintoo, Khorshedur Rahman, Sarwar Hossain and others -- stuck to their decision, and now they can consider themselves lucky as they get a regular stream of income from Bangladesh Navy during this nationwide shutdown.

The other players, though, have not had the luck as they solely depend on hockey to run their families, and with no league taking place in the last two years, they have been going through acute financial crisis following the coronavirus outbreak.

Bappy Kumar Ghosh, one of the unfortunate ones, had been helping his parents by earning money from premier hockey league in Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet apart from conducting coaching in Rajshahi and Cumilla. But now all his income sources have been cut off in the wake of Covid-19.

"My father gets only Tk 5000 salary and I provide most of the expenditure of our three-member family. But at the moment I can't help the family as there is no income. I used to get a small pocket money from coaching at Boikalin Sangha in Rajshahi and I used to earn by playing hockey leagues in Chattogram, Sylhet and Dhaka but everything is halted now. Besides, I was supposed to coach a unit of Bangladesh Army in June which is also uncertain now. I don't know what I will do in future and how to help the family," said the 28-year-old, who has been playing the premier league for the last 12 years -- a duration when only six editions of the league was held.

"If the league was held every year, I think I would have been far better off. As the Dhaka league is irregular, I bank on other district leagues and coaching profession to earn bread and butter," said Ghosh, who represented Sonali Bank, Shadharan Bima and Ajax SC in the league.

Former national striker Ashraful Islam Shishu is also going through similar crisis.



PHOTO: STAR FILE

A file photo shows hockey players taking a breather during practice.



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BAPPY KUMAR GHOSH
HOCKEY PLAYER

Football back in unaffected Turkmenistan

AFP, Ashgabat



Turkmenistan is rebooting its football season on Sunday, with fans flocking back to stadiums in one of the few countries yet to declare a case of coronavirus.

The reclusive Central Asian state followed other countries around the world when it suspended its eight-team league in March just three games into the season.

The national football federation cited recommendations by the health ministry and the World Health Organisation for preventing the spread of the illness.

A month later, and despite international concerns that Turkmen authorities are underplaying the threat of the virus, football is returning, with supporters only too happy to follow the action from the stands.

"Joy boosts our immunity," joked Ashir Yusupov, a 34-year-old entrepreneur.

He said he would be watching reigning champions Altyn Asyr take on early table-toppers Kopetdag in the capital Ashgabat on Sunday.

Yusupov said he had no fear of crowded places, despite being aware of bans on sports events in other countries.

"We have no coronavirus, so why not restart our league?" he asked.

Three ex-Soviet states have bucked the global trend for suspending professional leagues: Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Belarus.

Global interest in the Belarusian league has surged on the back of its decision, while the Tajikistan's Super Cup final earlier this month attracted a curious multi-lingual online following.



Dwayne Bravo posted a picture with his son on Instagram yesterday, captioning it: "I'm not lucky I'm blessed!!! #WeNotGivingUp #Champion"

PHOTO: COLLECTED

'Big three' planning to help struggling players

AFP, Paris



Novak Djokovic said on Saturday that he, Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal are organizing aid for players struggling with the paralysis of the game due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"I spoke to Roger and Rafa a few days ago," Djokovic, the world number one, said in an Instagram chat with friend and rival Stan Wawrinka on Saturday.

"We had a long conversation about the near future of tennis, what is going to happen, how we can contribute and how we can help especially lower-ranked players, who are obviously struggling the most."

"The majority of the players who are ranked between 200, 250 in the world, and the 700th or 1,000th do not have federation support, do not have sponsors. They are completely independent and left alone," he said.

"Guys who are ranked between 200-250, especially to 700...are thinking of leaving tennis right now."

He said players, the ATP and the four Grand Slams "would all get together and will contribute to a player relief fund that ATP will distribute."

"It looks, hopefully, that there will something between \$3 million and \$4.5 million that is going to be distributed," he estimated.

"Maybe if we don't have any tournaments this season, we can take a certain percentage from our prize money form Australian Open in January," he said. "These guys are the grass roots of tennis. The future of tennis. We need to show them they still can rely on support of the top guys."

Neuer irked as contract talks stall

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich captain and goalkeeper Manuel Neuer told German media Sunday he has become "irritated" with negotiations to extend his contract, which have reportedly stalled in recent weeks.

"All talks I have had since I have been here have been confidential... nothing has ever leaked," the 34-year-old told Germany's most popular daily Bild. "But now, details about the current talks are constantly appearing in the media, and are often untrue. That irritates me. It's not something I am used to at Bayern."

According to Bild, Neuer is demanding a 100-million-euro five-year deal.

"I want to have a contract which is a win-win situation for me and Bayern. I want to perform, be there for the team... and give 100 percent," he said.

"The conditions have to be right (for that)," he added.