



Veteran coach Wahidul Gani gives some tips to spinner Salma Khatun during Bangladesh women's cricket team training at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. PHOTO: BCB

## AFC Cup in Maldives

No headway in BD-Afg WC qualifier venue

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh Premier League champions Bashundhara Kings will play their Group D matches of the AFC Cup in Male from May 14 to 20 after the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) announced the Maldivian capital as a centralised venue to host the matches on Monday.

The three confirmed participants - Kings, Maziya Sports & Recreation Club of Maldives and ATK Mohun Bagan -- had bidden to host the group stage in their respective countries, but the AFC confirmed Male as the venue following 'close consultation with its participating member associations'.

Bangladesh could have a fourth team in the group in the form of Abahani, who will have to qualify for the fourth spot through two playoff matches. Six teams from the South Asia zone will battle for that single

playoff place.

ISL side Bengaluru FC will face the winners of the qualifying play-off preliminary round one clash between Nepal Army Club and Sri Lanka Police in preliminary round two. In the other preliminary round two clash, Abahani will face the winners of Maldives' Eagles and Bhutan's Thimphu City. Both matches will be played on April 14.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh will have to wait a little longer to learn whether they can host Afghanistan in their sixth World Cup/Asian Cup qualifying fixture on March 25 in Sylhet. The AFC yesterday asked BFF and Afghanistan Football Association to negotiate the issue among the two member nations.

The Asian football body also asked BFF to once against consider Afghanistan's appeal of playing the match at a centralised venue in June, but BFF, according to its general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag, is still trying to convince the Afghans to come to Bangladesh to play.

## Tigers near the end of tough isolation period

SPORTS REPORTER



The first seven days of self-isolation for the Bangladesh cricket team in New Zealand was anticipated to be a tough period for the tourists.

The sixth day of that period ended yesterday and the Tigers are strictly adhering to the 14-day mandatory quarantine protocols set by the hosts.

The first seven days were anticipated to be the most difficult phase where the cricketers had to stay inside their hotel rooms in self-isolation. However, they are allowed to walk inside the hotel premises for 30 minutes a day after completing their 48 hours of

self-isolation since landing in New Zealand on February 24.

For ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal exercise and watching movies has been the only way to pass the isolated days.

"I am actually passing time by watching Netflix, Amazon Prime and sleeping as we are not allowed to exit our rooms and meet others," said Tamim through a video message to the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) yesterday.

"Self-isolation was difficult and it is still going on. But personally, I thought it would have been harder. But somehow, we are managing and time is passing by. It already has been almost 4-5 days [in isolation] and not much more is left. Hope that the remainder of the days will also pass quickly," he added.

While Tamim did not face much difficulty to spend his self-isolation time in his hotel room, it was a bit harder for another left-hander, Soumya Sarkar, who is eagerly waiting to return to normal life.

"Normally I spend time working out in my room and cycling. I also watch movies but nowadays I am watching a few Bangla dramas. But how long can you exercise in a room alone?" asked Soumya.

Pacer Taskin Ahmed talked about the protocols the cricketers had to follow during the first seven days of their 14-day quarantine period.

"We all have our own single room and no one is allowed to go to any other room at the moment. We however have the option to walk around for thirty minutes a day with two different time slots.

We have to wear masks all the time whenever we are outside the room and also maintain social distancing.

"The hotel staff knocks on the door and puts the food outside our room. Even while collecting food, we have to wear the mask. As we have already tested negative for our second round of coronavirus tests, we are now able to use the laundry of the hotel. We were not even allowed to give our clothes for laundry in the first few days of quarantine," said Taskin.

In the light of such isolation, today - the seventh day - will be a big one for the Tigers. If they test negative in the third round of Covid-19 tests today, they will be able to start going to the gym and practising in small groups from tomorrow.



Bangladesh national football team's head coach Jamie Day takes the first shot of Covid-19 vaccine at the BSMMU in Dhaka yesterday. Day, along with assistant coach Stuart Watkiss and BFF's strategic director Paul Smalley were the recipients of the Covishield vaccine yesterday, with BFF president Kazi Salahuddin and several of the high-ups having already received it. The footballers, meanwhile, will have to wait a bit longer to get inoculated. According to a BFF spokesman, a list of 700 footballers including men's and women's national team players and players of the top leagues has been sent to the sports ministry for vaccination. The sports ministry has recently sent the list to the health ministry for approval. PHOTO: BFF

## Champions League Milan's main focus

AGENCIES

AC Milan returned to form with an enthralling 2-1 victory away to AS Roma on Sunday that restored a four-point gap to Serie A leaders Inter Milan.

The victory ends a four-match winless run in all competitions for Stefano Pioli's side, whose hopes of a first Serie A title in 10 years suffered a blow following back-to-back league defeats to Spezia and Inter.

Coach Stefano Pioli said qualifying for next season's Champions League remains AC Milan's main focus even though they are also in the running to secure the Serie A title for the first time in a decade.

"If you said a few months ago that we would be second in the table, nobody would have believed it," he told Sky Italia. "If we instead had 40 points, they would have said that we were having a great season, fighting for the Champions League after all these years. There are seven very strong teams, in the end only four will be happy and we hope to be one of them."

Milan have not featured in the Champions League since the 2013/14 season, and Pioli was keen to point out the progress made by his team.

"We're doing something important; we have 17 more points than we did last season, we're the youngest team and the team that has played the most games," he said.

Meanwhile, Romelu Lukaku scored after 33 seconds and set up another in Inter Milan's 3-0 win over Genoa on Sunday to keep their title push on track ahead of city rivals AC Milan.



The Bangladesh Para-Badminton Championship 2021, organised by the Bangladesh Badminton Federation, was held at the Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium in Paltan yesterday. A total of 30 male and 12 female physically challenged athletes took part in the event maintaining proper Covid-19 guidelines.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## Spirited Saif move to fourth

SPORTS REPORTER



Saif Sporting Club made a powerful start under Zulfikar Mahmud Mintu, thrashing Police FC 4-1 at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday to move to fourth position in the Bangladesh Premier League table.

The Federation Cup finalists released Belgian coach Paul Put last week following a poor start to the league, which saw them lose four out of their first 10 matches. However, Paul Put's last match in charge was a scrappy 2-1 win over Uttar Baridhara and the Saif players under the new coach looked more determined and sharper as they cruised to a big victory.

Saif's Nigerian strikers John Okoli and Kenneth Ikechukwu threatened to score from very early but it took them 44 minutes to break the deadlock. Ikechukwu, who saw his shot from 20 yards rattle the crossbar on 20



minutes, hit the target with a powerful shot from the edge of the box, the ball hitting the bottom of the bar before bouncing inside the goal line.

The second goal came only three minutes later, Okoli beating Police goalkeeper Mohammad Nehal at his near post after speeding across the box to keep a powerful cross from going past the touchline.

Police kept themselves in the game with Jamir Uddin's header reducing the margin in the 61st minute, but Okoli re-established Saif's two-goal cushion in the 87th minute with a brilliant solo effort, running down the pitch on a counter-attack before placing the ball past Nehal.

Substitute Sazzad Hossain put the icing on the cake with a curling effort four minutes into stoppage time after receiving a clever through-pass inside the box from Faisal Ahmed Fahim.

The win took Saif to 19 points from 11 matches while Police remained in eighth position with 12 points from same number of matches.

Meanwhile, Brothers Union got a crucial 5-2 win over Arambagh KS in the battle of the two bottom sides in the second match of the day. Ibrahim Moro had given Arambagh the lead in the 10th minute but Brothers hit back to win the high-scoring encounter to move five points, keeping Arambagh on a single point.

## Top-four battle heats up

REUTERS, LONDON



After Manchester City extended their lead of the Premier League, the battle for a top-four finish intensified on Sunday as Chelsea and Manchester United ground out a goalless draw, Leicester City lost and Liverpool finally came back to life.

Tottenham Hotspur and Arsenal showed signs that they could also join the fray while at the bottom Fulham missed an opportunity to claw closer to escaping the drop zone.

Chelsea's 0-0 home draw with second-placed United ensured Thomas Tuchel is still undefeated in nine games since replacing Frank Lampard, but it meant they failed to dislodge fourth-placed West Ham United who became Manchester City's 20th successive victims in all competitions on Saturday.

The match at Stamford Bridge was largely a forgettable affair with the main talking point a controversial penalty incident in the first half



when referee Stuart Attwell opted not to award United a spot kick for a handball by Callum Hudson-Odoi.

Either way it was a better result for United who preserved their six-point lead over Chelsea, even if it left them 12 points behind runaway leaders City.

"It would have been a big result," Tuchel said. "We tried everything to win, to be prepared for no other intention but to win. We are in the

middle of a battle to the top four.

"We have closed the gap quickly and now is the moment to hang in and to show performances every three or four days."

Injury-hit champions Liverpool snapped a four-match losing run in the league with a rather laboured 2-0 win at bottom club Sheffield United -- Curtis Jones's 48th-minute goal and Roberto Firmino's shot deflected in off United's Kean Bryan enough for Jurgen Klopp's side to get back to winning ways. Liverpool's second goal was their 7,000 in the top flight.

They stayed sixth with 43 points but are only a point behind fifth-placed Chelsea, who they play on Thursday, and two behind surprise package West Ham. "Plenty of people have written us off. That's fine. With all the problems we have had we're still around the exciting places," Klopp said.

Leicester, who are third with 49 points, ended a dismal week in which they went out of the Europa League with a 3-1 home defeat by Arsenal, despite taking the lead.

## 'Felix made a big impact'

REUTERS



La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid secured a vital 2-0 win away to Villarreal on Sunday to reaffirm their title ambitions following a difficult run of results.

A first win in four games in all competitions moved Atletico on to 58 points after 24 games, five clear of second-placed Barcelona, who have played 25, and six above third-placed Real Madrid.

Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone heaped praise on Joao Felix after the 21-year-old responded to being benched for Sunday's match by scoring as a substitute to seal a badly-needed win.

Atletico's 126-million-euro (\$152 million) forward was excluded from the starting lineup for the second time in three matches and had been largely ineffective when he did start in Tuesday's 1-0 defeat to Chelsea in the Champions

League.

He was introduced at the start of the second half with his side a goal up against Villarreal and settled their nerves with an instinctive volley, scoring for the first time since late January. "He scored a great goal and made a big impact and that's what we need from him. I love it when players rebel and try to prove how strong they are. He's very important to us," Simeone said.

The Portuguese marked the goal by putting his finger to his lips although Simeone would not be drawn on whether his player was trying to send him a message over not starting the game. "We'll have to ask him why he did that," said the coach.

Defender Stefan Savic added: "Joao hadn't scored for a very long time and I'm delighted for him because he's a player with incredible talent. I don't think he was angry with anyone, he knows what we need."

