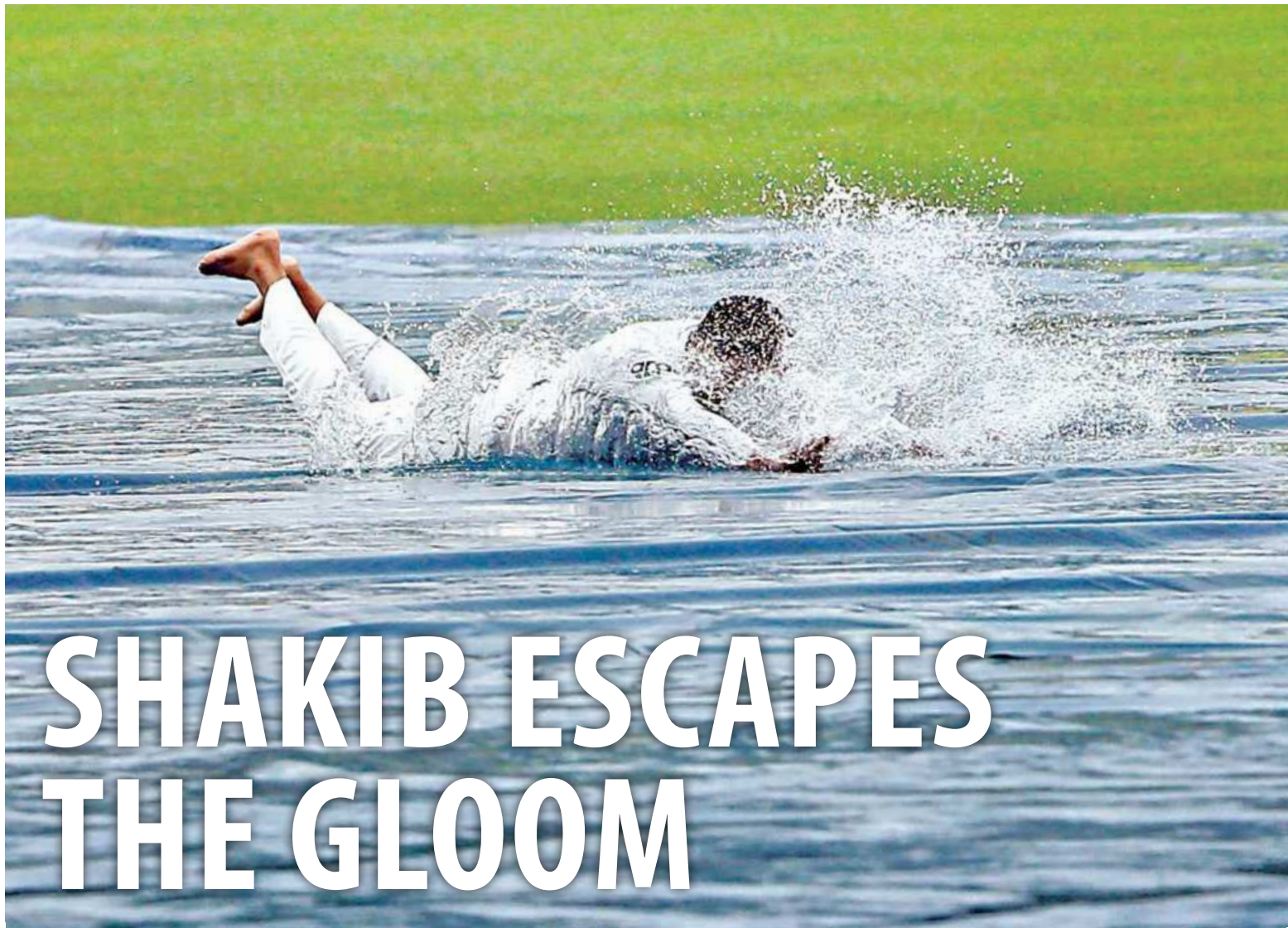




SHAKIB ESCAPES THE GLOOM

PHOTO: **FIROZ AHMED**

ABDULLAH AL MEHIDI

Light to moderately heavy drizzles marred proceedings on the second day, with only 6.2 overs possible before play was called off at 3:00pm yesterday. Nothing of significance happened in those overs and the small crowd at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur spent mostly a quiet day, some seeking shelter from rain while others kept the cheers going during the brief period of play when the day's proceedings started at 12:50pm. The rain, however, seemed to have had the opposite effect on ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan. Having gone for an indoor session after play stopped at 1:20pm, Shakib returned to the field on his way back to the dressing room and provided the highlight of the day. A barefoot Shakib ran in like a fielder chasing a ball running away for four and proceeded to slide across the covers engulfing the wickets. Shakib appeared to have enjoyed the moment

the most on a gloomy, uneventful day and induced some of his child-like joy to the fans as well. It stood in stark contrast to the scenario he himself was facing, being included in the squad for the New Zealand tour despite notifying the BCB twice of his unavailability. After communicating informally, the southpaw responded to BCB president Nazmul Hassan's comments about awaiting an official letter from Shakib before deciding the matter by handing in a written application seeking permission to sit out the tour. But Shakib's moment of joy was not enough to dissipate the dark clouds gathering over Bangladesh cricket. Players were being questioned, as were members of the coaching staff and selectors. An investigation into the T20 World Cup debacle is still ongoing, which inevitably brought the players' lack of trust in the processes of the team management and coaches back in focus. Already in the throings of a chaotic scenario, the team's upcoming tour of New Zealand was brought into further turmoil by the drama. The

ongoing Pakistan series has not exactly been a charm either and the cancellation of the second day's play provide no respite either. Babar Azam and Azhar Ali were able to add 27 runs to their overnight score of 161 for two, keeping Bangladesh wicketless. Pacer Khaled Ahmed's very first delivery strayed down the leg-side and was flicked away for four. Azhar, struggling to show any authority on the prior day, reached his fifty as Bangladesh pacers Ebadot Hossain and Khaled failed to find what they needed in conditions conducive to pace. Frequently, they bowled length deliveries, unable to induce mistakes from the Pakistan batters, who could rely on getting that extra time to play shots on the back foot. Ebadot, who had put in a good performance in the first Test, was guilty of erring in length too and did not manage the kind of movement he found on the first day. Shakib's character was evident from his capability to refocus despite difficult hurdles but one individual's ability to keep their head above water will not be enough for Bangladesh cricket to get past the gloom.

Rain interrupted the second Test in Mirpur with only 6.2 overs played and Pakistan reached 188-2, adding 27 from their first day total. Overnight unbeaten batsman Azhar Ali (52) struck back-to-back boundaries off pace bowler Ebadot Hossain to complete his 34th Test fifty before the match officials called off play at 3:00 pm. Skipper Babar Azam added 11 runs to stay unbeaten on 71. The weather lived up to the original forecast of a downpour on Sunday, and it is likely to continue into the third day due to the deep depression caused by Cyclone Jawad on the west-central Bay of Bengal.

PHOTO: **STAR**



Root is wicket Australia prize most, says Cummins

REUTERS



Pat Cummins admits he would relish taking the prized wicket of England captain Joe Root in this week's opening Ashes Test in Brisbane even if he had not earned a late promotion into the Australian captaincy. Cummins makes his debut as captain when the series begins at the Gabba on Wednesday following Tim Paine's resignation due to a 'sexting' scandal less than three weeks before the opener. The 28-year-old is the first fast bowler to lead Australia in 65 years and his promotion increases the prospect of the teams' leaders going head-to-head when hostilities finally begin. "I don't know if the captaincy brings a different element for me, but the last few series we've played against him he's always been our



Australia captain Pat Cummins and England skipper Joe Root pose with the Ashes trophy at the Gabba in Brisbane yesterday, ahead of the opening Ashes Test.

PHOTO: **AFP**

prized wicket," said Cummins. "Not necessarily the one we talk about the most, but he's number one batter in the world at

the minute, he's their captain. It's going to be a big battle ground for us." Cummins revealed Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc were likely to open the bowling for Australia at the Gabba while Travis Head had been selected in the line-up ahead of Usman Khawaja. Root, meanwhile, will be looking to become the first captain to lead England to victory in Australia since Mike Gatting in 1986-87. The Yorkshireman's side shared a 2-2 draw with the Australians in England two-and-a-half years ago and Root is hoping to go one better this time around. "If you look at how hard it has been for English captains and English teams over the years, (winning in Australia) is something that doesn't happen very often, so of course it will define my captaincy," he said. "I'm not naive enough to think that it won't. But it's a great opportunity. I'm very excited about it and can't wait for the series to get going."

A drama borne of helplessness?

SPORTS REPORTER

Why is the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) so hesitant to clear their position regarding all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan's appeal for a leave? That question has been raised as the game's local governing body, even as late as last night, was unable to confirm their position ahead of the team's departure for New Zealand on December 9. When asked, BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury only confirmed: "We have yet to take any decision." Apparently, he was awaiting advice from higher-ups. "Concerned people will look into the pros and cons of his personal reasons due to which he wanted to skip the tour," he added. It was hard to find any professionalism about the manner in which the board handled the issue -- from including a player's name in the squad after he had already verbally informed of his unwillingness to tour to then dilly-dallying after he submitted a written request. It will be interesting to see how the BCB reacts to a contracted player handing in a written plea only after his name was included in the squad on Saturday evening. "As a contracted player, he does not have the right to skip national duties at will. You cannot always do that citing personal reasons," a board official said on condition of anonymity.

Then why does the board not take some action? "It's not that easy," he responded. Another official added scathingly, also on condition of anonymity: "A senior player can follow a pick-and-choose policy to prolong their career but a contracted player cannot do that without the consultation of the board. But I think we have loopholes in our systems and Shakib is taking full advantage for personal gain." There had been whispers of Shakib's unviability for the New Zealand tour since start of the Pakistan series, but the drama only unfolded on Saturday. As BCB president Nazmul Hassan informed reporters that the 34-year old had verbally communicated his unwillingness to tour, the board simultaneously announced a squad including the all-rounder. Then Shakib's written letter confirmed that he was not available for the tour. Shakib also skipped the previous New Zealand tour earlier this year citing personal reasons and there have been several instances of the star cricketer opting to skip international assignments, causing a big headache for selectors and team management. Questions can be raised if there are any functions that the cricket operations committee or selection panel could serve in the face of such an issue? Or is the board completely helpless about the 'Shakib issue'.



Ashwin puts India on brink of victory

REUTERS, Mumbai



India off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin struck three early blows to put the hosts on course for a series-clinching victory against New Zealand in the second and final Test at the Wankhede Stadium on Sunday. The hosts were five wickets away from a 1-0 series victory with New Zealand reaching 140 for five at close of play on day three, chasing an improbable target of 540 and with two days still remaining. It was a much better showing with the bat from the world test champions who managed only 62 in their first innings in reply to India's 325 on a pitch offering plenty of assistance to the spin bowlers. Ashwin, third on the list of most successful Indian Test bowlers with 426 scalps, dismissed stand-in captain Tom Latham lbw before the players left the field early for the tea interval due to a technical problem with the Spidercam. The wily 35-year-old returned to send back Will Young and Ross Taylor in the final session to reduce New Zealand to 55 for three. Daryl Mitchell and Henry Nicholls kept India at bay with a stand of 73 before left-arm spinner Axar Patel separated them by dismissing the former for an attacking 60. The touring side's problems were compounded when wicketkeeper-batter Tom Blundell had a brain fade moment and was run out without scoring. Nicholls survived nervous moments but remained unbeaten on 36 with Rachin Ravindra two not out at the close.



Shakib issue 'doesn't affect the team'

SPORTS REPORTER

Despite the ongoing discourse on whether Shakib will tour with the squad in New Zealand, Bangladesh fielding coach Mizanur Rahman Babul stated that such concern doesn't impact the dressing room. With the rain having halted the proceedings of the second Test's proceedings, as merely seven overs were bowled on the second day, the fielding coach attended the press conference yesterday where the environment of the dressing room was called into question following Shakib's application for withdrawal. "It's the board's and Shakib's personal matter whether he will go or not. However, this doesn't affect the team. "If anyone doesn't want to go, there's no scope of thinking about him. The team gets strengthened if Shakib and other good players are in the squad," Babul said. Bangladesh's seamers had a disappointing outing with the ball despite the presence of a wet wicket and overcast weather and Babul didn't forget to show his disappointment on the seamers either. "Actually, our pace bowlers didn't bowl well. The condition was in favour of them but they failed to perform and take the advantage of it," he added. "If we compare with Pakistan, our pace bowlers are either mentally weak or if they try to improvise something to scalp a wicket, they seem to have a hard time," Babul concluded.