

## Tigresses eye final CG spot

SPORTS REPORTER

In a bid to avail the final spot at the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham later this year, the Nigar Sultan-led Bangladesh women's cricket team will begin their qualifying campaign against hosts Malaysia at the Kinrara Academy Oval in Kuala Lumpur today. The match is scheduled to begin at 7:30am BST.

Bangladesh have already confirmed their ticket to New Zealand for their maiden World Cup appearance in March-April this year, and the Tigresses will be expected to topple the four other sides - Malaysia, Kenya, Scotland and Sri Lanka - in the qualifiers.

All five teams will compete in a round-robin format T20 tournament, with the table-topping team booking their ticket to Birmingham.

England gained automatic qualification for the games as hosts while Australia, England, India, New Zealand, Pakistan and South Africa have also secured their spots for the games, alongside Barbados, selected as the representative from the West Indies.

Women's cricket will feature in the Commonwealth Games for the first time this year, with the sport's last appearance being a men's competition in 1998, fittingly in Kuala Lumpur.

Bangladesh go into the tournament on the back of controversial exclusion of pacer Jahanara Alam but the Tigresses will be boosted by a close-fought contest won against Scotland in their only warm-up game on Sunday.

After being asked to bat first, Bangladesh posted 148 on the board.

The bowlers then stepped up as they restricted the Scottish side to 136, winning the game by 12 runs.



Rafael Nadal launched his bid for a record 21st Grand Slam title in blistering fashion, bludgeoning American Marcos Giron 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 in the first round at Rod Laver Arena on Monday. PHOTO: AFP

## 'It would be better if Djokovic were playing'

REUTERS, Melbourne

Rafa Nadal is taking no pleasure from the absence of great rival Novak Djokovic at the Australian Open, even if it means he has a clearer shot at the Grand Slam title record.

Level on 20 Grand Slam titles with Djokovic and Roger Federer, the Spanish great said it would be "better for everyone" if the Serb was competing at Melbourne Park.

"The ideal situation in the world of sport (is) that the best players are on court and playing the most important events, without a doubt," Nadal told reporters on Monday after trouncing American Marcos Giron 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 to sail into the second round.

"If Novak Djokovic is playing here, it's

better for everybody, no doubt about that."

Djokovic was deported from Australia on Sunday after losing a court case to have the cancellation of his visa overturned.

The world number one has drawn flak for refusing to vaccinate against COVID-19 and for attending public events last month after testing positive.

However, sixth seed Nadal said Djokovic was not the only party at fault for the "terrible situation we faced for the last two weeks" and that others must share the responsibility.

"I think the situation has been a mess," added the Spaniard, who would have met Djokovic in the semi-finals if the draw went with seeding.

"He's not the only one that did probably the things bad in that case.

"So on a personal level, yes, I would like

to see him playing here.

"If it's fair or not that he's playing here is another discussion that I don't want to talk anymore about that."

The only former champion left in the draw, Nadal started his tournament superbly at a sunbathed Rod Laver Arena, breaking world number 66 Giron five times in the match and thrashing 34 winners past the outclassed American.

Having played only two matches after the 2021 French Open last season, Nadal has started the new season winning all four completed matches he has played, and that was after coming back from a recent COVID-19 infection.

"One month ago, situation has been different," he said.

"Looks very ugly in some way. Now here we are, no?"

## Young Tigers regroup after setback

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Bangladesh are eager to bounce back after a thrashing seven-wicket defeat against England in the opening game of the ICC Under-19 World Cup on Sunday.

The Young Tigers will play their next two Group A matches against Canada and the UAE on January 20 and 22, respectively.

Batting remained the biggest area of concern for Rakibul Hasan and his troop as Bangladesh were bundled out for just 97 runs in 35.2 overs after electing to bat in the campaign opener at Basseterre.

None of the batters were able to make an impact and looked shaky right from the start, scoring just six runs in five overs. At one point, Bangladesh were reeling at 51 for 9 before last batter Ripon Mondol top-scored with an unbeaten 33 and added 46 runs for the final wicket with Naimur Rohman, to guide Bangladesh total close to three figures.

"I think it was a disaster for us in the first game against England, where we had a tough day at the office," age-group selector Sazzad Ahmed Shipon, who is accompanying the team in the West Indies, told The Daily Star over the phone yesterday.

"Obviously, England came hard on us and we did not get the opportunity to recover from the early damage. I think we need to focus on the positive aspect of our game and for the batters.



"I think it's important to adjust to the conditions as well since it's not easy to bat in such conditions. We are confident of bouncing back strongly," stated Shipon.

Skipper Rakibul, who was part of the World Cup-winning side in 2020, stated that their first target will be to reach the semi-finals.

After the defeat against England, the cricketers opted to rest yesterday and spent time together to assess the game plan for the upcoming fixtures.

"Obviously, we didn't want to begin our title-defence campaign with such a comprehensive defeat. Boys were disappointed after the loss against England but we are confident to regroup again and bounce back for the next two group games against Canada and the UAE," said Bangladesh team manager Abu Emam Mohammad Kawsar.



Former Bangladesh coach Steve Rhodes, who came to Dhaka to work with the Comilla Victorians in the upcoming BPL, gets a hug from former captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza as Mahmudullah Riyad watches on at the BCB Academy Ground yesterday. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## Shakib on a power-hitting grind

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Since returning from his ban last year, Shakib Al Hasan had been looking to find his groove in all three formats and although there have been struggles, there has also been successes. However, always feeling the need to keep ahead of the curve, Shakib had identified some areas that needed work.

During the home series against Australia and New Zealand last year, followed by the T20 World Cup in UAE, Shakib had gotten a few positive starts but failed to make hay. For batters, the power factor in T20s is of primary importance while it provides added confidence when shots come off. Ahead of the BPL 2020, Shakib zoned in and began work with long-time mentor Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, who is also the batting consultant of Shakib's Fortune Barishal team.

"Recently, he didn't look very

comfortable playing over the top and we are trying to do some work so that his power hitting gets better and he can easily clear the ground," Fahim told The Daily Star on Saturday after working with Shakib individually.

The focus was on changing the stance and bat-swing to get optimum connection.

"We were discussing what areas of power hitting needed work and what can be done. If he does what he was doing before, it will be the same as before, so bringing some changes to his technique. Things are going well and we will see when the matches begin. What we were doing is not T20 specific but will help in with his overall batting effort. We have worked with footwork and his bat-swing," Fahim had said.

Even during the recently-concluded BCL, Shakib had lost his wicket trying to clear the field. Yesterday, Shakib went through

the gears once again but was able to connect a few shots that looked better than his previous efforts.

"When he batted at the centre wicket today, some deliveries went a good distance, so the connection was good. Hopefully with two- or three more days' work, he will be able to get consistent. If he can play big shots at the top end of the innings, it will be a big factor for us," Fahim told reporters after the session yesterday.

However, the slower nature of the pitches in Bangladesh is not wholly conducive to free T20 shot-playing. "Since the pitches are slow and have uneven bounce, he will have to be selective. It will be about putting loose deliveries away," Fahim told The Daily Star.

While most players find it difficult to adapt, Shakib's progress gives Barishal hope that the all-rounder can bring something new with the bat in the upcoming BPL.

*Congratulations!*

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