

"Now I hope everyone will be able to understand that one should not look down upon any form of job."

Bangladesh head coach, Golam Rabbani Choton, said regarding the relentless taunts he received in the past for guiding women's football in the country.



The girls of Bangladesh U-15s alongside the whole nation rejoiced upon seeing the SAFF Champions parade through the streets of Dhaka in a locally unprecedented fashion. One incident, however, damped the festive spirit as the news of Ritu Porna Chakma's injury broke out. The winger required three stitches after her head touched an overhead banner in Nikunja during the Bangladesh contingent's open-top bus ride from the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport to the BFF headquarters yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Women footballers paint Dhaka Red and Green

ASHFAQ UL MUSHFIQ

Open top bus parades are conventional in Europe, where World Cup winners like Germany, Spain and Italy and Champions League giants like Real Madrid, Bayern Munich and AC Milan have made such celebrations customary.

But in Bangladesh, the women footballers' historic conquest of the SAFF Women's Championship provided a rare chance for the nation to serenade its own champions on their homecoming on Wednesday.

Fans flooded social media with requests for a reception in response to a post on social media by Sanjida Akhter. The midfielder reminded on her post that this team was made up of players from all across the country and that their success belonged to the entire nation.

When this reporter reached the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, where the players would embark on a bus ride to the BFF House in Motijheel, the VIP exit was already packed with fans chanting



the names of the players.

A woman said she left a class at university to watch the final.

"When the final started, I was in class. I requested my teacher and he allowed me after some initial resistance. I was the only one in our university cafeteria screaming and shouting," she said, adding how she was inspired by the footballers. "As a woman, every day is a challenge. The way these girls have shattered those barriers makes me feel stronger as a human being."

An ardent cricket fan who paints his face like a Tiger and attends cricket

matches regularly, was also present. He promised to never miss another game featuring the women's football team. As soon as the bus started, it was hustle and bustle all the way from departure to end.

Thousands of fans stood wherever they could find space to greet the South Asian champions, with the music blaring from the bus and a marching band beating drums and blowing trumpets behind them creating the illusion of a festival moving through town.

As the bus glided down Uttara, it was difficult for cars to keep up due to the

number of pedestrians in the way. Those who could not find space on the walkways had stepped halfway onto the main road. The players waved them back and threw flower petals at fans as a way of expressing their gratitude.

Between interactions, players would jump around and dance to the popular track of West Indian cricketers Dwayne Bravo and Chris Gayle, 'Champions'.

From Uttara to Mohakhali, the number of fans continued to increase. Every single foot over bridge on the way to the BFF premises was filled with fans desperate for a close-up of Sabina and Co.

Further down the road, people of all ages and from all echelons of society eagerly waited. When the bus drew to the horizon, they immediately broke into cheers in sheer excitement.

Bijoy Smarani is famous for congestion, but Dhaka's commuters were probably excited to be stuck in traffic for the first time when the bus came down the other side of the street. People immediately began to exit their vehicles, hoping to get a snap of the champions.

As the sun began to set, the nightlights of the metropolis only fueled excitement in areas like Tejgaon, Kakrail and Motijheel. Captain Sabina Khutun held and lifted the SAFF Championship trophy for the fans all the way from start to finish, ensuring everyone would have a memory with the prize.

As the open-top bus parade reached the BFF office, it found thousands more waiting to welcome them home while camera flashes from all around set the tone for a glorious future for women's football.

Tigresses romp into semis

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh advanced to the semifinals of the ICC Women's T20 World Cup Qualifiers after emerging as Group A champions following a commanding 55-run win against the United States in their third and final group game at the Sheikh Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi yesterday.

After electing to bat, skipper Nigar Sultana Joty and Murshida Khutun smashed unbeaten fifties as Bangladesh posted 158 for one in their allotted 20 overs. Opener Shamima Sultana (10) fell in the fourth over, but Sanjida and Joty simply took over. They shared an unbeaten 138-run partnership for the second wicket.

Murshida scored a team-high 77 off 64 balls and smashed nine fours while Joty made 56 off 40 balls laced with six fours and a six.

In reply, the Tigresses restricted the United States to 12 for three inside the first five overs and they sputtered to 103 for three after 20 overs. Salma Khutun and Nahida Akhter picked up a wicket each.

Bangladesh will face the runners-up from Group B, likely to be the winner of today's game between Papua New Guinea and Thailand, on Friday. The final will be on September 25, with both finalists securing a place in next year's showpiece event in South Africa.



Starry-eyed U-15s reunite with heroes

EKUSH TAPADER

Aspiring stars, gearing up to take Bangladesh women's football forward in future, could not wait to embrace their beloved elder sisters at the BFF Bhaban yesterday as the 2022 SAFF Women's Championship-winning team were on their way to the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) headquarters in Motijheel yesterday.

It seemed a never-ending wait for the Bangladesh Under-15s who waited from the afternoon to welcome the victorious women in red and green, who reached there after having paraded through the streets of Dhaka on an open-top bus for over four hours.

An air of anticipation engulfed the BFF headquarters. Many repeatedly had asked reporters the arrival time of Sabina Khutun and company. "They gave us loads of courage. My coach, Monica [Chakma] apu, and Ritu Porna [Chakma] apu gave me the confidence



of wearing the national colours while coming from the hill tracks," said Umeha Marma, who hails from Rangamati.

"It's a huge achievement. We can't wait to enjoy these moments with them. It seems like

time has stood still," said an excited Puja Rani Das, who hails from Brahmanbaria.

"Now our job will be easy because they showed our women can achieve great things in sports. You know in our locality

[Brahmanbaria] many can't appreciate women pursuing sports. But following this great achievement, we can hope that they will have some food for thought and will reconsider their stance," Puja added.

Ritu Akhtar was overwhelmed by the performance of her seniors. "We have been seeing them on television for a while now, and some of them are our roommates. We are thrilled! I think they played their best football in Kathmandu," said Ritu.

"What everybody is saying is that this win helps us to overcome our [U-15s] family's bleak financial conditions at present. After this SAFF triumph, my mother also reminded me to take football more seriously, so that we can also pull off something big," said Oishi.

Thui Nu Marma, who also hails from Rangamati, was dreaming of better days for her family from now onwards.

"I aspired to become a footballer when I saw Anuching Marma. I also want to become a quality player like my senior sisters so that I can make my parents happy. My parents are saying that if I can play good football, I will be able to take my family's responsibility," Thui said.