

## Messi's expected Inter Miami debut on Saturday

AGENCIES

World Cup winner Lionel Messi is set to make his MLS debut with Inter Miami on Friday night [in the wee hours of Saturday in Bangladesh], but fans might have to wait a half to see the Argentina legend.

Miami coach Tata Martino said Messi and newly signed Sergio Busquets are ready for game action, but he has yet to decide if they come off the bench against Cruz Azul in the teams' Leagues Cup opener.

"From what I have seen up to now they are going fit to play and it is likely that on Friday they can be there," Martino told Argentina's ESPN Futbol 12 on Wednesday. "Whether that will be as starters or coming in at the half, we will have to make that decision yet, but as I see it, Leo as well as Busi can play."

Tickets for the game are going for between \$275 and \$110,000, according to ticket reselling website Vivid Seats.

Earlier, Inter Miami co-owner David Beckham also gave an update on Messi's expected debut. "Leo will play some part of the game [against Cruz Azul] but that will be down to the coach [and] it'll be down to Leo to decide if he's ready."

According to Bangladesh time, Inter Miami's game against Cruz Azul will begin at 6:00 am on Saturday.



**New Zealand's Hannah Wilkinson celebrates scoring the opening goal of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup during a 1-0 win over Norway at Eden Park in Auckland on Thursday. The win was the first at the showpiece event for the Football Ferns. Meanwhile, Australia, the other hosts, registered an identical margin win against Ireland despite missing Sam Kerr, the team's star player, through injury.**

PHOTO: AFP

## Bangladesh advance in FIFA rankings

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh national football team's recent results in the SAFF Championship 2023 have made an impact in the latest FIFA rankings as they moved up three places to 189.

Before the continental tournament, Bangladesh were ranked 192.

Jamal Bhuiyan and Co made an incredible turnaround after losing the opening game 2-0 to Lebanon and made it to their first semifinal in the SAFF Championship in 14 years.

Now, on the basis of the latest FIFA Rankings in Asia, top 27 nations will directly play the group stage of the Asia zone in the joint qualifiers of the World Cup and the Asian Cup while bottom 18 teams will face each other in pre-qualifiers. Nine winners from them will join the 27 teams in the group stage.

Though Bangladesh moved up three places in the FIFA Rankings, the men in red and green will have to face higher ranked teams in the pre-qualifiers as they still remain in the bottom half of the 18 teams. The pre-qualifiers will be played in home-and-away match basis between October 12 and 17. The draw of 18 teams will take place on July 27.

## BTTF combines junior TT with senior one

SPORTS REPORTER

The National Junior Table Tennis Championships are set to be incorporated into the senior one as the 39th edition of the national event gets underway on Saturday at the Rifles Club in Chattogram, following a four-year gap.

The initiative from the Bangladesh Table Tennis Federation (BTTF) will stop mass participation of junior players as they will now play in only two events - boys' singles and girls' singles. Four other events of the junior event - boys' doubles, boys' team, girls' doubles and girls' team - have been dropped altogether.

The junior (U-18) meet was last held in 2017 with the participation of 180 players from 29 teams, but this time only 74 junior peddlers, including 28 girls, will take part in the combined event.

BTTF vice-president Hassan Munir claimed that they have incorporated the two events to save money.

"Initially we used to hold both senior and junior event together before staging those separately," Munir told The Daily Star yesterday.

"If we extend the event by only two days, we can use the same umpires, managers and venue to hold the junior championships. But if we hold it separately, the senior event will cost Tk 19 lakh while the junior event will cost Tk 8 to 9 lakh," Munir added.

The BTTF is getting Tk 22 lakh from Chattogram Jilla Krira Sangsha, UCB Bank and Polar Ice Cream to organise the 39th edition of the championships, where 230 players including 74 junior players will vie in nine events - men's singles, doubles and team, women's singles, doubles and team, mixed doubles, boys' singles and girls' singles. The number of peddlers during the 38th edition in 2019 was 260.

While prize money is often offered in privately-organised table tennis tournaments in Dhaka, the national championships will see no such prize money.

"In those tournaments, the number of participants is very low, so they can provide prize money. We need at least Tk 25 lakh to arrange the event and for that we have to work hard to get sponsors. We have financial limitation," Munir said.

The BTTF official, however, said that the federation is providing one-way ticket, daily allowance and accommodation for the participants during the event.

## Tamim and logistical issues highlight BCB's challenges

SPORTS REPORTER

As per Bangladesh's Asia Cup schedule, the Tigers will face Sri Lanka in their opening group match in Kandy, Sri Lanka, on August 31 and then will have to be in Pakistan's Lahore in two days to play Afghanistan.

Bangladesh will be afforded chartered flights as they are one of the teams that will play matches both in Pakistan and Sri Lanka as per the hybrid model. Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) cricket operations committee chairman Jalal Yunus talked to the media yesterday and said that the board is aware of this 'travelling issue'.

"Following our first game in Kandy, we have to leave for Lahore. It is what it is, and we can not do anything about it. It's [Asian Cricket Council] ACC's decision. ACC will be providing chartered flights to make the journey more comfortable. The arrangement will be for all the teams who have matches in two countries. It's ACC's responsibility. We, of course, want the flights to be from good organisations," Jalal informed the media yesterday.

The tournament is set to test Bangladesh's mental agility in terms of coping with logistical challenges while focusing on the matches as well.

Bangladesh, if they qualify for the Super Four stage, will get two days to prepare for their game against Pakistan on September 6.

Then the team will have to hurry back to Colombo for their Super Four game on September 9, with Sri Lanka being the likely opponent.

Following that game, the Tigers, however, would get some rest days before their last Super Four game, against India most likely, on September 15.

"Of course, it's a problem to travel this much. We all know that to take a flight, you have to be at the airport two hours beforehand with your luggage. There is



the matter of jet lag as well. So, that will create a mental pressure. Pakistan is far away from Sri Lanka but we have to abide by the ACC's decision," he added.

Bangladesh's issues are not only limited to logistical challenges. With ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal having unretired, the question mark over his fitness still remains. Tamim yesterday said in an interview to local news outlets that a lot of things from the fallout of the retirement saga will now depend on his meeting with the

cricket operations committee chairman Jalal once he returns to the country.

Jalal informed that Tamim wants to return to the country following his treatment in the UK by July 31, with the Asia Cup camp starting from July 29.

"Tamim will be going to London on the 26th. After his treatment there, a decision will be taken based on his condition. His plan is to return to the country by the 31st. The decision going forward will depend on his physical condition," Jalal said regarding Tamim.

From the looks of the Emerging Asia Cup squad, where as many as six openers were lined up, the team management had been preparing for backup options for the opening slot. The performances of a few have already garnered attention of the team management and one or two players will be in the Asia Cup preliminary camp.

"Emerging squad players will be in the preliminary preparation camp. Many of them are doing well. One or two among them will be coming to the preliminary team but there is no certainty that they will make the best 15," Jalal added.

The Bangla Tigers unit has also been undergoing camp in Chattogram but ultimately, Jalal informed that players getting the nod or being excluded will depend on the medical department as fitness takes precedence ahead of the World Cup.

## Azam lauds 'improved' Shakeel

AFP, Galle

Pakistan skipper Babar Azam said on Thursday his team's latest Test hero Saud Shakeel had stepped up his game and showcased new shots in his match-winning unbeaten 208 against Sri Lanka.

The visitors won the first Test in Galle by four wickets after opener Imam-ul-Haq hit an unbeaten 50 to anchor a tricky chase of 131 on the final day to lead the two-match series 1-0.

But left-handed batsman Shakeel was the star after his maiden Test double century powered Pakistan to 461 all out and a handy first-innings lead of 149.

His 177-run partnership with Agha Salman, who hit 83, helped Pakistan bounce back from 101-5 in their reply to Sri Lanka's 312.

"Saud has improved a lot. He has been working hard after the New Zealand series," Azam said of the man of the match.

"He attended two camps in Lahore and Karachi. I spoke with him and he told me he had developed a few shots which he applied in this innings.

"As captain, I am very satisfied with his performance. When he came to bat we had lost four wickets and Saud and Salman built the partnership."

Azam added: "When your team-mate performs well and your team wins the match it gives a lot of confidence, especially in different conditions, and youngsters like Saud, Salman and Abrar Ahmed stepped up and performed."

Shakeel looked assured in his stroke-making in his marathon knock and then a cameo of 30 on the fifth day.

Pakistan spinners Noman Ali and Abrar took three wickets each and Salman chipped in with two from his off spin to bowl Sri Lanka out for 279 on day four.

Dhananjaya de Silva stood out for Sri Lanka with his 122 in the first innings and then 82 in the second but the rest of the batting faltered.

Skipper Dimuth Karunaratne acknowledged their batting had flopped. "In this match, all our main batters didn't make runs. Usually two-three batters performed in the top seven, but apart from Dhananjaya's contribution there was nothing big from the rest."

The second Test starts in Colombo on Monday.



England opener Zak Crawley acknowledges the crowd after scoring his maiden Ashes ton on the second day of the fourth Test at Old Trafford yesterday. Crawley remained unbeaten on 132 as the hosts posted 239 for two at Tea after wrapping up Australia's first innings for 317 runs.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Bangladesh A hopeful against India

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh A would be taking on formidable India A in the Emerging Asia Cup semifinal today, hoping for a good day in the day-night fixture in Colombo. India A made the semis after sweeping away Pakistan A by eight wickets, and selector Habibul Bashar told reporters that they are hoping for a good day to overcome India's challenge.

Bangladesh themselves put in a side bolstered by openers, with Soumya Sarkar being played as a middle-order batter. With a World Cup coming up, the team management had decided that younger stars who can perform in the tournament would be in contention.

"We are very hopeful but India are a good side. It's a semifinal after all and you need a good day. Everyone has played good cricket but it's important to repeat that. Their batting and bowling are very good," Bashar said yesterday.

The bowling side will be in focus even the team management are in favour of testing how the batters fare. While the likes of Ripon Mondol or Tazim Sakib are being given opportunities for the future, for Soumya and Sheikh Mahedi, the chance presented could have a more immediate impact as national team looks for backups.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Players of the Sunnysdale School's handball team, Jaguars, pose for a photograph at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport on Wednesday upon their return from Denmark, where they finished runners-up in the Dronninglund Cup - an under-12 school handball tournament.