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Bangladesh skipper Shakib Al Hasan enjoys a game of chess with Mehedi Hasan Miraz yesterday on their flight from Dharamshala to Chennai where the Tigers will take on New Zealand, who were given a boost with regular captain Kane Williamson set to get into the World Cup with the Bangladesh game on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP/BCB

Williamson, Southee boost for NZ

REUTERS, Bengaluru

New Zealand's regular skipper Kane Williamson could feature in the World Cup game against Bangladesh in Chennai having built up match fitness following his knee injury, head coach Gary Stead said on Wednesday.

Williamson missed wins over defending champions England and the Netherlands to work on his fielding and running between the wickets and Stead said he was pleased with the 33-year-old's progress ahead of Friday's game.

"He's had a great last five or six days, really ramped up the fielding aspect of things," Stead told reporters. "That's the key for Kane at the moment. It's not about his injury so much now, it's his ability to run between the wickets and to field and to consistently do that over a 50-over game."

"We've got two more trainings still to get through but at this stage, all things are looking good for Kane to return in this game. We still say that with an air of caution but we're really pleased with the way he has been coming on."

Rachin Ravindra has impressed batting at number three in the absence of Williamson with an unbeaten 123 against England and 51 against the Dutch.

Familiar environment, but challenge steep

MAZHAR UDDIN FROM CHENNAI

Bangladesh team reached Chennai ahead of their third World Cup game against New Zealand yesterday.

Shakib Al Hasan and his troops checked into the ITC Grand Chola hotel in Chennai and are scheduled to practise at the MA Chidambaram Stadium from 6:00pm (local time) under lights today.

The Tigers, after a promising start to their World Cup campaign with a six-wicket win over Afghanistan in Dharamshala, went on to face a crushing 137-run defeat to the defending champions England at the same venue on Tuesday.

The change in venue might bring fortune for Bangladesh who have travelled all the way from the northwestern region of India to the southern part of the country where the hot and sunny conditions are expected to suit the Tigers.

However, there are still a few areas that the Tigers would need to work on after their heavy defeat to England. The concerns regarding the top order, especially the opening position, still persist and need to be sorted out soon.

With no backup opener in the squad, head coach Chandika Hathurusingha will need to find a way out to settle things after young opener Tanzid Hasan Tamim failed in both games. However, the team management will be relieved to see Liton Das returning to form -- the right-hander made 76 off 66 balls against England as his batting was the only positive thing for the Tigers in the game.

Apart from the batting department, the Tigers will also hope for their fast bowling unit, which has shown great improvement in the last two years or so, to get into the groove after the likes of Taskin Ahmed, Shoriful Islam, and Mustafizur Rahman remained ordinary in both the games.

It will be interesting to see whether the Tigers think tank come up with yet another different strategy against a high-flying New Zealand, who will be eying their third consecutive victory in the flagship event when they take on Bangladesh on October 13.

In the first game that was hosted in Chennai, spinners ruled the roost when India began the World Cup with a convincing six-wicket win against Australia at the MA Chidambaram Stadium.

After being sent to bat, Australia were bundled out for just 199 with the spin trio of Ravindra Jadeja, Kuldeep Yadav, and Ravichandran Ashwin combining to take six wickets for 104 runs in 30 overs to set up the victory.

The Chepauk Stadium is expected to provide assistance and help the Bangladesh spinners Shakib, Mahedi Hasan, and Mehedi Hasan Miraz get an edge but the one thing that they need to be wary of is the fact that New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson, an excellent player of spin, is highly likely to make his first appearance in the World Cup against the Tigers.

The player of the tournament in the previous edition

of the World Cup, Williamson is recovering fast after he suffered a ruptured anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in his right knee during the Indian Premier League earlier this year.

It will be Bangladesh's second-ever ODI in Chennai since the Tigers lost to Kenya by 28 runs back in 1988 during a triangular series involving hosts India at this venue.



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NCL's 'picnic mood' to continue?

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

The 25th edition of the National Cricket League (NCL) is set to commence across the country on Thursday, but the scheduling and organisation of one of the most important longer-format domestic competitions is still a problem area for regional organisers.

The start of the tournament had already been delayed two days to accommodate players returning from the Hangzhou Asian Games.

Moreover, the High Performance (HP) squad's tour of Sri Lanka on October 14 would see many key players miss NCL's 2023 season. This leads to a vacancy already pronounced by absence of players playing the ongoing ODI World Cup in India.

Akbar Ali had captained Rangpur Division to the title in the last NCL but will now hope to participate in the last few matches. Stars such as Mominul Haque will be available while Tamim Iqbal has not been included in his Chattogram side.

Scheduling of domestic tournaments often suffers due to national teams or other national assignments, which had led to critics labelling the competition as a 'picnic tournament'. Chattogram Division, which slumped to Tier 2 of the NCL last season, will be missing five to six players due to the HP's Sri Lanka assignment.

Sirajuddin Mohammad Alamgir, general secretary of Chittagong Divisional Sports Association and organiser from Chattogram Division, told The Daily Star, "It's a setback since there are various programmes like HP, Asian Games etc during the NCL."

"It's difficult to play with full strength. More importance needs to be placed on the NCL so that scheduling, bar the national team's assignment, such as HP or A team's schedule, do not clash with the tournament. It shouldn't be necessary to hold the tournament at one go."

"If we can't brand our first-class cricket, it's difficult to create opportunities to develop players for the longer version. It is a common problem for every division that we build a team with a certain mindset and after one or two games, the team is half empty. This continues on an ad-hoc basis. We are losing five-six players this time," Sirajuddin further said, adding that the event is set to roll on in a light-hearted spirit.

The national team selectors, along with the board, balance the make-up of the squad. But Sirajuddin believes that local talents often do not come into the radar.

"We had given a chance to the likes of Tamim once but, since divisions do not still have the responsibility, the cricket board too is deprived of judging local stars here. Some opportunity has to be created for the regional bodies for their own selection panel so they build better teams."

The tournament committee had ushered in measures to improve the tournament last season. Chances are likely the tournament would move from two-tier system to round-robin league format to introduce more competitiveness with players' draft such as BCL.

Selector Habibul Bashar informed, "Yes, it may change next season. Plans have been made, but this time there was a time shortage to implement it."

In a country where longer-version cricket is still lagging behind white-ball formats, more discussions between regional bodies with more accountability could help get NCL to the next level.

A win without picking up injuries satisfies England

REUTERS

England all-rounder Sam Curran said they were thankful to have come through Tuesday's World Cup win over Bangladesh without picking up injuries after players struggled to keep their feet due to the state of the Dharamshala outfield.

While the venue, located in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains, is considered one of the most picturesque grounds in the world the state of the outfield left a lot to be desired, with bowlers and fielders forced to exercise caution on the uneven grass.

England skipper Jos Buttler said before the game that the outfield was in "poor" condition while it was given an 'average' rating by the International Cricket Council.

"It was pretty bad," Curran said. "We're pretty happy to get through that game without any injuries ...

That's pretty important and we don't have to come back here.

"Hopefully, the outfield does get better. It's not very nice, what's happened to it. But I thought the



wicket was really good. Luckily we're all fit."

Dharamshala will host three more World Cup matches this month with South Africa playing the

Netherlands next week before New Zealand play twice, against India and Australia.

England's Reece Topley ripped through Bangladesh's top order to set up the 137-run victory for the reigning champions with figures of 4-43 but the fast bowler said he had to shorten his run-up due to the conditions.

"The legs are a bit heavier than normal on this outfield, for sure. Running in to bowl, you barely felt like you were making it to the crease," Topley said.

"It was a unique challenge at this ground and we responded in the right way. Jos told us to get on with it, so we did."

Bangladesh bowler Taskin Ahmed said the soft outfield made running difficult.

"Everyone felt that we were a little off-balance or slipping in the run-up," he said.

PHOTO: AFP