

Uncertainty over Shakib's Pakistan Tests inclusion

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) officials are still undecided about the inclusion of premier all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan in their upcoming two-match Test series against Pakistan.

Shakib, who is currently playing in the Global T20 Canada, earlier expressed his desire to feature in the Test series -- with the first Test scheduled to begin on August 21 in Rawalpindi -- before leaving Bangladesh for the USA to take part in Major League Cricket last month.

Having been granted NOC by BCB until August 12, Shakib was expected to join the national teammates either in Bangladesh or Pakistan from Canada to prepare for the Test series.

However, Shakib, who was a lawmaker in the Awami League government that fell after a student protest on August 5, is no longer an MP following the president's order the next day. Due to the current unrest, he is unlikely to return to Bangladesh anytime soon.

It remains unclear whether his political identity would impact his selection in the national team. According to sources,



Shakib's fitness for red-ball cricket is also a concern as he has been playing non-stop T20 matches since the home series against Zimbabwe in May.

"Before it was just about whether he [Shakib] could come to Bangladesh and then travel to Pakistan. He's been playing cricket but in a format where he has to score quickly in short time. And even though he knows how to play longer matches, there's a concern about whether he can handle the physical demands [of Test cricket]," a BCB official told The Daily Star yesterday.

The selectors, who were unable to contact Shakib over the past week due to unrest situation, are likely to sit with skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto and head coach Chandika Hathurusingha in one or two days regarding the matter and other issues about the squad for the Pakistan Test series before they announce their final squad.

It was learned from another source that BCB has already formed an 18-member preliminary squad with Shakib and pacer Taskin Ahmed being in the team, but the final 15-member squad will be decided after the meeting with all the members of the selection panel, which had to be deferred a few times due to the current unrest situation.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, Cricket Operation In-charge Shahriar Nafees informed that Shakib's inclusion in the Test squad depends both on his availability and selection.

"He is only a cricketer now," Nafees told reporters in Mirpur. "There is a question of whether he is available for the series now, and another being whether he gets picked for the tour. We will run our activity keeping these two factors in mind," he concluded.

'Uncomfortable' presence of outsiders at Mirpur stadium

SPORTS REPORTER

Security concern is a quickly growing issue in Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium's premises due to the presence of outsiders.

While some club officials and organisers were seen coming with banners on Tuesday, demanding justice for the irregularities and corruption in the board under the Awami League government, on Wednesday there were presence of outsiders not affiliated with cricket.

Bangladesh 'A' team began their training following the unrest in the country but the presence of outsiders created an eerie atmosphere. Some were seen patrolling the periphery of the BCB offices while from time to time, media personnel saw people coming in with bikes and entering the premises of the stadium through gate number 2, virtually unobstructed.

Security personnel seemed unsure about the comings and goings. Inquired about these people, security personnel said, "Some of them quarrelled amongst themselves because there were two separate groups present at the same time."

A BCB official said, "It's an uncomfortable situation right now for everyone. It's a time for transition for the country. Let's see and hopefully after the interim government is formed, things will normalise."

Shahriar Nafees, in charge of BCB's cricket



operations, was asked about the overall situation in terms of security or lack of it.

"Our players, many of them have practised in such situations. We have seen before that when change of power comes, this happens. But our regular staff are aware of the situation. The atmosphere in the whole country is a bit uncertain. We hope that just like the whole country would get back to normalcy in one to two days and run normally, the cricket board too would run in its normal course."

A patrol team of Bangladesh Army had visited the stadium as part of routine patrol.

"Bangladesh Army patrol team has been visiting since August 6. It's their routine work and not because of any security threat. The way they have been maintaining law and order in the country to normalise the situation, it's part of that," Shariar claimed.

PCB 'optimistic' about hosting Bangladesh Tests

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan are "optimistic" about hosting Bangladesh for their Test series this month, a source close to the cricket board said Wednesday, after a second-string team delayed its arrival amid an unfolding political crisis in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina stepped down on Monday and fled the country following mass protests demanding her resignation.

The second tier team, known as the "A team", were due to arrive in Islamabad on Tuesday but pushed back their schedule to Saturday.

The national team are due to land on August 17 for two Tests -- the first in Rawalpindi from August 21 and the second in Karachi from August 30.

"The PCB is proceeding with the plans and optimistic that the Test series will go ahead as scheduled," a source close to the Pakistan Cricket Board said, asking not to be named.

In an official statement on Wednesday, the PCB said it "has been in contact with the Bangladesh Cricket Board".

It also announced a 17-man squad for the two Tests against the Bangladesh national team.

Pakistan squad: Shan Masood (captain), Saud Shakeel (vice-captain), Aamir Jamal (subject to fitness), Abdullah Shafique, Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Kamran Ghulam, Khurram Shahzad, Mir Hamza, Mohammad Ali, Mohammad Hurraira, Mohammad Rizwan, Naseem Shah, Saim Ayub, Salman Ali Agha, Sarfaraz Ahmed, Shaheen Shah Afridi

'Mentally devastated' Saifuddin requests two-month break

SPORTS REPORTER

All-rounder Mohammad Saifuddin has withdrawn himself from the upcoming Bangladesh 'A' team's tour of Pakistan, saying he has been feeling 'mentally devastated' and requesting a two-month break from all cricketing activities.

Saifuddin, who was picked for the second four-day match of a two-match series and the following three-match one-day series against Pakistan 'A', expressed his desire to take a break through an email to the selectors earlier this month, informed a Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) official to The Daily Star on Wednesday.

In the email, he informed that he was devastated over not being picked for the ICC T20 World Cup squad in June, coupled with the fact that he could not fly to Canada to feature in the ongoing Global T20 due to the ongoing unrest in the country.

"Due to these matters, I want to keep myself away from all forms of cricket for the next two months. Hopefully, you will take the matter in a positive way," Saifuddin's email read.

However, it was learned that Saifuddin didn't mention the right rib injury that he sustained while attending an individual gym session in Mirpur two days before his Canada-bound flight, which was scheduled for late July.

Saifuddin was scheduled to represent the Montreal Tigers in the GT20 and he had also obtained a NOC from the BCB till August 8. Then, he



was expected to join the 'A' team in Pakistan for the second four-day and one-day series.

"He observed the situation for a day [after the injury]. When he felt that his pain wasn't decreasing, he contacted our medical team. [BCB chief physician] Dr. Debashish [Chowdhury] checked him and gave him some instructions for treatment to assess his condition. We found severity in his pain," BCB physio Muzaddad Sany told The Daily Star yesterday.

"We were not sure what type of injury it was. He planned to travel to Canada, and the 22-hour economy-class flight might have aggravated his injury."

"There would also be questions on us as to why we cleared him to play the tournament. So, we had asked him not to go to Canada to feature in the league," he added.

According to sources, Saifuddin's

recent letter to BCB has irked the selectors as the cricketer had also skipped the Bangladesh Tigers' majority practice sessions in Sylhet and Chattogram last month.

"He only practised for nine days in Sylhet and four days in Chattogram out of a total of 45 days of Bangladesh Tigers' practice camp. He left the Chattogram camp after playing the first two white-ball practice matches citing that he had to attend his biometric for Canada visa," said an official on request of anonymity.

"He had also earlier taken leave citing family issues before Eid. He then sought extended leave which we also granted seeing his family emergency. Now he is talking about his reluctance about cricket," he concluded.

Saifuddin, who last represented Bangladesh in a T20I series against Zimbabwe in May this year, could not be reached for comments on the matter.

TODAY'S GOLD RUSH

MARATHON SWIMMING Women's 10 km 11:30 am	Starts from 10:15 pm HOCKEY (MEN'S) 11:00 pm
SPORTS CLIMBING Men's Speed 4:16 pm	CYCLING TRACK Women's Keirin 11:01 pm Men's Omnium 11:37 pm
CANOE SPRINT Men's Double 500m 5:20 pm Women's Kayak Four 500m 5:40 pm	WEIGHTLIFTING Men's 73 kg 11:30 pm ATHLETICS
DIVING Men's 3m Springboard 7:00 pm	Women's Long Jump 12:00 am (Friday) Men's Javelin Throw 12:25 am (Friday) Women's 200 m 12:30 am (Friday) Women's 400m Hurdles 1:25 am (Friday) Men's 110m Hurdles 1:45 am (Friday)
WEIGHTLIFTING Women's 59 kg 7:00 pm	TAEKWONDO Men's 68 kg 1:19 am (Friday) Women's 57 kg 1:37 am (Friday)
SAILING Men's Kite Starts from 4:13 pm Women's Kite Starts from 5:13 pm	BOXING Men's 51 kg 2:34 am (Friday) Women's 54 kg 2:51 am (Friday)
WRESTLING Men's Greco-Roman 67 kg Men's Greco-Roman 87 kg Women's Freestyle 53 kg	

A family affair

REUTERS, Paris

For the 32 women's and men's teams in the Paris Olympics table tennis matches are about representing their country, but for the many siblings amongst them it is also about representing their family and the shared last name they hold dear.

At least eight sibling pairs are among the 96 athletes competing in the table tennis team events, a higher-than-usual percentage in the world of top-level competitive sports.

Some of these athletes come from families with deep-rooted table tennis traditions, while others were inspired by the desire to follow in the footsteps of an older sibling, finding joy in the sport and keeping each other company.

One of the best known sibling duos in the sport, French favourites Alexis and Felix Lebrun, have cheered for each other on and off the courts.

"Table tennis is a family sport. It's always a part of my family," said Felix, who ran to hug his brother after his bronze medal win for France, the first in the sport since 2000.

"I live my dream to be here with my brother," added Felix, who hails from a family where their father was a French champion and their uncle an Olympian.

When the younger Lebrun felt nervous before his medal match, he turned to his brother Alexis for support, especially since Alexis had been eliminated by the same opponent, Brazil's Hugo Calderano, earlier in the singles.

Sweden's Anton Kallberg echoed the influence of family on his decision to take up



table tennis, as well as that of his younger sister Christina. Both are competing in their second Olympics together.

"I would say our parents played a big part. My dad, my mum, even my uncle and grandfather played a bit, so I pretty much had no choice but to get into table tennis," said Kallberg.

Not every Olympian table tennis sibling was inspired by their parents. For 19-year-old Brazilian Guilina Takahashi, it was her sister Bruna, five years her senior, who provided the inspiration.

"I play because of her. When I was six, I watched her play and thought, why not? Then I started to play, and this is my life now," said Takahashi, who described going to the Olympics with her sister as a dream come true.

Competing in sport with a close family member is not always easy. Rivalry between siblings, most famously demonstrated by the

Williams sisters in tennis, can add complexity.

The Lebrun brothers, while teammates at the Olympics, often face each other in singles competitions, where Alexis has a better record despite Felix's higher world ranking.

Even siblings competing in different gender categories can feel the pressure brought on by their older counterparts.

"For the older sibling, if it works out, it works out; but for the younger one, they're under so much more attention and pressure to perform," said Japanese table tennis player Tomokazu Harimoto, who also comes from a table tennis family.

"I have a lot of respect for my sister. She faces so much pressure yet still delivers and continues to improve," Harimoto said of 16-year-old Miwa, who is making her Olympic debut in Japan's women's team.

Harimoto mentioned that while there are no current plans it would be very special to play mixed doubles with his sister at future Olympics.

Off the courts, travelling for tournaments with siblings can help combat homesickness. In the Olympics Village, Brazil's Giulia Takahashi, 19, shares a room with her sister Bruna, 24.

"It's like my house, I can do whatever I want. She takes care of me and wakes me up every morning," she said giggling.

And how do their parents back home feel? "Double proud for the double trouble," said Bruna.



Brazil forward Adriana celebrates with a teammate after scoring her team's third goal against Spain in their women's semifinal match of the Olympics at the Marseille Stadium on Tuesday. Brazil thrashed the world champions 4-2 to set up Saturday's final clash against four-time champions USA.

PHOTO: AFP