

## Focus finally shifts to cricket

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

Cricketing activities took centre stage for the first time in three days in Mirpur yesterday as both Bangladesh and South Africa national cricket teams completed intense training sessions ahead of the opening Test of the two-match series, scheduled to start on October 21.

After two drama-filled days where Shakib Al Hasan cancelling his return to the country to play his farewell Test and other related issues grabbed the headlines, focus finally shifted to cricket yesterday with both teams putting the finishing touch to their preparation for the Mirpur Test, which will be the first Test between the two sides in Bangladeshi soil since 2015.

Although Bangladesh's new head coach Phil Simmons conducted his first training session on Friday, he did not have the full squad at his disposal due to rainy weather. Yesterday, the 61-year-old finally got the opportunity to work with



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

**“The good thing is we have a very important Test match to prepare for. We win the next few Tests, and we are in contention for the [WTC] final. My first port of call is cricket, and about getting the squad ready for Monday. The last two days [of training] have been brilliant. We have to try to leave out the confusion that's around the cricket, and concentrate to prepare for Monday.”**

BANGLADESH HEAD COACH PHIL SIMMONS

the full team with his full coaching set-up at the Sher-e Bangla National Cricket Stadium.

Mushtaq Ahmed, who worked with the Tigers during the home series against Zimbabwe in May, in the ICC

T20 World Cup in the USA and West Indies and then in the Pakistan tour, was also present in Mirpur at yesterday's training session after

rejoining the Bangladesh team as their spin bowling coach for the South Africa Tests.

The former Pakistan leg-spinner is not under a full-time contract with the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) and hence was not with them in the recent India tour due to some prior commitments.

“He [Mushtaq] is here for this [South Africa] series. This year, whenever he is available and does not have any prior commitments, he will work series by series with us. Right now, he is here, we'll see what happens in the next series,” BCB's cricket operations in-charge Shahriar Nafees told The Daily Star yesterday.

Meanwhile, Simmons, who arrived

in Dhaka on Wednesday, also attended his first official press conference as the Tigers' head coach after the practice session where he emphasised the need for his players to focus on cricket and cancel out all outside noise.

“That's a big part of our job over the next few days, to make sure the focus is on the cricket and not outside of cricket,” Simmons told the reporters yesterday, adding that he was offered the job just a week and a half ago.

The West Indian also spoke about South Africa's poor Test record in the sub-continent in the last 10 years. Since beating Sri Lanka in the Galle Test back in 2014, the Proteas have been winless in the 14 Tests they have played in four sub-continent countries, losing 10 and drawing four rain-marred contests.

Simmons saw this as a very “good opportunity” for the hosts to seal a maiden Test series win over the Proteas but remained cautious of the resilience of their opponents.

“Bangladesh are usually very strong at home. So, it is a very good opportunity for us to win the Test series. South Africa has that [poor record in sub-continent] hanging over their head but they are a resilient team. They will work hard to change that.”

Meanwhile, the Proteas are leaving no stone unturned to end their nine-match losing streak in Tests in sub-continent, said their star left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj.

“We know Bangladesh are really good competitors in their own conditions. But we also want to break the stereotype about not being able to win away from home especially in sub-continent conditions,” said Maharaj, who will lead the Proteas spin-attack which includes off-spinner Dane Piedt and left arm spinner Senuran Muthusamy along with some part-timers.



## Sabina & Co begin title-defence today

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will begin their title-defence of the SAFF Women's Championship against Pakistan today and will look to book a semifinal berth with a victory in Kathmandu.

The match will kick off at 5:45pm Bangladesh time at the Dashrath Stadium, the very venue where two years ago Bangladesh achieved their greatest success in women's football, lifting the trophy of the South Asian competition for the first time with a 3-1 win against hosts Nepal in the final.

On way to that famous triumph, Golam Rabbani Choton's charges had beaten every opposition that they came up against, including a 6-0 drubbing of Pakistan in the group stage.

That was, interestingly, the only occasion that these two teams met in the competition's

**“I think technically we will be up there with the best. From a tactical and discipline point of view, I really hope we hone in on those qualities. This team has a lot to offer.”**

Bangladesh coach Peter Butler



Arms outstretched in uncontained euphoria, India's Sarfaraz Khan celebrates after scoring a century against New Zealand during the fourth day of the first Test at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru yesterday. Sarfaraz's maiden Test ton in his fourth outing -- a 150-run knock off 195 balls, batting at No. 4, featuring 18 fours and three sixes -- powered India to 462 all out in 99.3 overs in their second innings, leaving the visitors with a tricky target of 107 runs today.

PHOTO: AFP

Rishabh Pant played a heroic innings, forging a 177-run stand with Sarfaraz to help India claw back, but the swashbuckling wicketkeeper-batter suffered a heartbreaking dismissal on 99 off 105 balls. Pant, however, is no stranger to the nervous nineties, with six Test centuries and six dismissals in the 90s in 35 Tests prior to this match.

## U-17s beaten by 10-man Cambodia

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh made a dreadful start to their AFC U-17 Asian Cup Qualifiers campaign with a 1-0 defeat against 10-man Cambodia in Phnom Penh yesterday.

The hosts were down to 10 men following a dangerous tackle on Bangladesh forward Arham Islam in the 25 minute of the match. However, the charges of Saiful Bari Titu failed to make the numerical advantage count as they wasted a handful of opportunities, allowing the opposition to break them down from a counter-attack in the 85th minute of the match.

Bangladesh will play their second match on October 23 against Philippines, who thrashed Macau 7-0 in the first match of the group. Afghanistan are the other team in this group.

## NCL Tanzid steals show on opening day

SPORTS REPORTER

Rajshahi Division's Tanzid Hasan Tamim stole the spotlight on the opening day of the 26th National Cricket League 2024-25 as the opening batter struck a brilliant hundred against Khulna Division at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium (SICS) yesterday.

Tanzid struck 19 fours and four sixes on his way to a quick-fire 141 off 133 balls -- his fourth first-class ton -- while Farhad Hossain and Shakhir Hossain made unbeaten 91 and 61 runs, respectively, to guide Rajshahi to 385 for four at stumps after asked to bat.

Tanzid, who hasn't enjoyed much success with the bat in the recent past, had a reprieve in the game's first ball off Alamin Hossain as the fielder at first slip dropped a sitter. However, the 23-year-old kept the Rajshahi scoreboard ticking, despite the fall of a few wickets at the other end, reaching three figures in 101 deliveries before he was finally dismissed by pacer Abdul Halim in the innings' 49th over.

Farhad and Shakhir then ensured no further casualties for the day, composing an unbeaten partnership of 134 runs for the fifth wicket. For Khulna, off-spinner Mahedi Hasan took two wickets.

Meanwhile, at SICS Ground-2, Dhaka Metro finished the day at 102 for one at stumps after Barishal Division opted to bowl. The match witnessed a delayed start due to a wet outfield, leading to only 44 overs of play.

Elsewhere, bad weather played spoilsport in two other matches involving Rangpur and Chattogram in Bogura and Sylhet and defending champions Dhaka in Khulna.



## Liverpool host Chelsea in first major test

REUTERS, MANCHESTER

Liverpool manager Arne Slot has enjoyed a record-breaking start to his tenure at Anfield but has been measured in his response as he says they have yet to face a top side, although that is all about to change with the visit of in-form Chelsea.

Dutchman Slot, the first Liverpool manager to win nine of his first 10 games in charge, must now steer the leaders through a tough schedule, with a gruelling run of 10 games in three competitions that could go a long way to shaping their season.

Liverpool have 18 points after seven games, having scored 13 goals and conceded two, to stand a point ahead of Manchester City and Arsenal, while Chelsea are fourth on 14.

“I looked at the league table and ‘OK, which teams did we face until now and which position are they? Are they in the top half or the bottom?’ Slot said of the schedule so far.

“There are a lot of difficult teams we still have to face ... let's see where we are then when

it comes to conceding goals because maybe the fixture schedule has been ‘nice’ to us when you see the league table.”

Chelsea have won all three of their league games on the road this season by a combined score of 10-2.

Liverpool's gruelling stretch of matches, which includes a trip to Arsenal on Oct. 27 and the visit of Manchester City on Dec. 1, is lousy timing considering first-choice goalkeeper Alisson is expected to miss most of it.

The Brazilian is set to be sidelined with a hamstring injury until the league game at Southampton on Nov. 24.

Slot, however, is confident his number two, Ireland international Caoimhin Kelleher, can fill in seamlessly.

“Alisson is our clear number one,” the 46-year-old Dutchman said. “(He is) the best goalkeeper in the world so it's always a blow when he gets injured. But in almost every position we have a second option that is also really good.

“Caoimhin Kelleher has already shown that.”



past six editions, with the only other meeting between the two sides coming at the 2010 South Asian Games, where Bangladesh had won 1-0 in Dhaka.

Sabina Khatun, Bangladesh's all-time top-scorer and inspirational captain, scored in both games -- the only goal in the 2010 victory and a hat-trick in the 6-0 win in 2022.

After watching Pakistan put up a fight against five-time champions India in the tournament's first match, which ended in a 5-2 win for India, Sabina believes this time Pakistan will be a much different proposition for them.

“This Pakistan team are much better than the last time. They tried to play toe-to-toe with India. It won't be easy. It will be a challenge for us,” the Bangladesh skipper said following an hour-long training session in Kathmandu's St Xavier's Ground yesterday.

Sabina, the top-scorer of last edition, however said that their target is to ensure the semifinals with a victory in the first match.

“It won't be easy for any team to take the title home,” the 30-year-old forward said. “Our target will be to get the opening goal and take the chances that we create.”

Sabina feels the team will miss striker Sirat Jahan Swapna and defender Akhi Khatun -- two of their stars from the previous campaign, but it is an opportunity for others to step up.

Bangladesh coach Peter Butler believes his side are one of the best in terms of quality and that he would hope to see them do justice to the talent with a disciplined effort.

“I think technically we will be up there with the best. From a tactical and discipline point of view, I really hope we hone in on those qualities. This team has a lot to offer,” the British coach opined.