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DHAKA FRIDAY FEBRUARY 21, 2025, FALGUN 8, 1431 BS

CT debutants Afghanistan ready to go all in

SPORTS DESK

Afghanistan will make their Champions Trophy debut today at when the Hashmatullah Shahidi-led side lock horns with South Africa in their first match of the mega event at the newly renovated National Stadium in Karachi.

Tembu Bavuma's South Africa has the requisite quality with the bat and the ball to make a deep impact in the tournament, even if their patchy recent form suggests otherwise.

It's been 27 years since South Africa lifted an ICC Men's senior white-ball Trophy and 1998 was the year of the inaugural ICC Men's Champions Trophy, and it was also the only time that South Africa claimed a senior ICC Men's silverware.

So, they will be looking for a good start in the tournament but Afghanistan, the breakout team of the last two ICC World Cups – both ODI in 2023 and T20 in 2024 – will be looking to spring a few surprises in this tournament as well.

Afghanistan have emerged as one of the fastest-growing cricketing nations, consistently challenging top teams and producing world-class talents. While their dominance in T20 cricket is well-established, the this Champions Trophy presents an opportunity to showcase their strength in the 50-over format.

They impressed in the 2023 ODI World Cup, finishing sixth with the same points as Pakistan, and reached the



The two teams have met five times in ODIs and the head-to-head record is 3-2 in South Africa's favor.

semi-finals of the 2024 T20 World Cup, defeating top teams along the way. Their squad is packed with match-winners who have gained valuable experience playing in international leagues and ICC events.

Notably, Afghanistan scripted history last year by scripting their maiden ODI series win over the Proteas, by 2-1 margin.

"We have recently beaten South Africa in Sharjah so we have that confidence with us and we are not under any pressure," said Afghanistan skipper Shahidi.

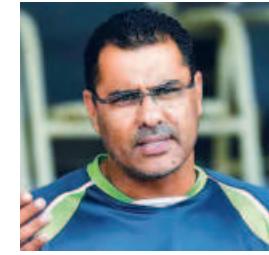
Afghanistan skipper also vowed his team wants to win the Trophy.

"We are doing very good so we are here to win the final and not just to participate. We are definitely hundred per cent looking to win this event."



"When he (Babar Azam) plays well, there's no better sight, simple as that. But if you are going to take 90 balls to make 60 then you are going to lose more games."

Former Pakistan captain **Waqar Younis** said following Pakistan's 60-run defeat to New Zealand in Champions Trophy opener on Wednesday.



Without cramps, could've scored 20-30 more: Hridoy

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Dubai

Despite scoring a fighting hundred, Towhid Hridoy shouldered the blame for Bangladesh's failure to post a more challenging target for India in their ICC Champions Trophy Group A match in Dubai yesterday, as the batter said that getting cramped up during the last stretch of his innings shaved a few runs off the total.

"Alhamdulillah, I'm fine now. I think my cramping was the bigger issue [than Jaker Ali's dismissal]. If I had been fine, I feel I could have scored 20-30 runs more for the team," Hridoy told reporters after the match in Dubai yesterday.

After being reduced to 35-5 only in the ninth over, Hridoy along with Jaker put up a record 154-run stand off 206 balls for the sixth wicket to trigger a comeback.

The partnership was finally broken when



A familiar script of face-saving heroics

ASHFAQ-UL ALAM

After getting dismissed as the last Bangladesh batter in their ICC Champions Trophy opener against India in Dubai yesterday, centurion Towhid Hridoy limped back to the dressing room, with shoulders slumped and a pained expression etched across his face – a wounded soldier who knew his resilience and determination were not enough to lift Bangladesh out of trouble.

Hridoy came to the crease when Bangladesh were three down for 26 inside seven overs after opting to bat first and, almost in the blink of an eye, lost two partners.

With half the side already gone and 41.3 overs still left in the innings, Hridoy and Jaker Ali did the sensible things – closed shop, took runs when they could, and, most importantly, did not lose their wickets.

And the duo, to their credit, rescued the side from catastrophe with a 154-run stand – their highest-ever partnership against India in ODIs for any wicket and the all-time best sixth-wicket stand in Champions Trophy, surpassing 131 runs by South Africa's Justin Kemp and Mark Boucher registered against

Pakistan in Mohali in 2006.

But then Jaker got dismissed for 68 off 114 balls, deceived by a cutter from Mohammad Shami. To make matters worse, Hridoy started cramping up a few overs later.

What followed were a few minor contributions from the tail enders and Hridoy fighting through the pain to take Bangladesh's innings to the final over, completing his maiden ODI ton in the process. Despite Hridoy's heroics and Jaker's assistance, the Tigers could only put up a paltry 228 on the board, which, against a heavyweight Indian team, seemed insufficient.

While Hridoy is sure to garner a lot of deserved praise for his innings, what also is worth mentioning is that a knock of such skill and determination usually makes no difference to the team's fate.

The script is all too familiar for Bangladesh in ICC events. The Tigers look completely down and out after losing wickets in clusters at the top, leaving it to a few defiant middle-order batters to salvage respectability.

Yet, despite their fight, the deficit remains too large to overturn. In the last ODI World Cup in 2023,

for example, Bangladesh experienced similar collapses in five matches: 49-4 against England, 56-4 against New Zealand, 81-6 against South Africa, 70-6 against Netherlands, and 23-3 against Pakistan.

Of these matches, the Tigers crossed the 200-run barrier four times, only failing to do so against Netherlands, and finished on the losing end on all five occasions.

Bangladesh's most famous victory in the Champions Trophy, the five-wicket win over New Zealand in Cardiff back in 2017, also came after a top order collapse, as they were 33-4 before Mahmudullah Riyad and Shakib Al Hasan struck centuries and strung together a record stand to take them over the line.

Neither was on the field yesterday. Mahmudullah was out injured, while Shakib was not picked for the tournament. In their absence, Hridoy and Jaker stepped up, fought bravely, and put forth a commendable effort.

But, with a sub-par total against an intimidating batting force, another chapter in Bangladesh's growing anthology of valiant yet fruitless battles was in the making, which ended in a six-wicket defeat.

Rana omission turns heads in Dubai

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Dubai

The pre-match hype around Bangladesh's speedster Nahid Rana proved to be for nought as the pacer did not get picked for their opening Group A match of the ongoing ICC Champions Trophy against India in Dubai yesterday, a decision that raised quite a few eyebrows.

Out of the four Bangladesh squad members who got benched against India, Parvez Hossain Emon wasn't a surprise as he has been brought in as a back-up opener and Mahmudullah's was a forced omission as the all-rounder, who has hit half-centuries in his last four ODI innings, is still recuperating from a calf muscle injury he sustained during Bangladesh's first training session in Dubai.

But Rana, Bangladesh's lone pacer who can hit 150kmph, not making the cut as the management chose to go with the three-pronged attack of – Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman and Tanzim Hasan Sakib instead, surprised many.

In the pre-match press meet too, Indian journalists brought up Rana a few times to Shanto, who also showered praises on the youngster, which led to the common belief that the Tigers would pick him in the opener.

Former Bangladesh skipper and current ICC development manager Aminul Islam Bulbul, who arrived in Dubai from Muscat a day before the contest, was among the many who were perplexed by Rana's omission but was even more shocked that left-arm spinner

Nasum Ahmed had been left out. As India were playing with six right-handed batters, Aminul insisted that the Tigers might have missed a trick by not bringing in Nasum in their playing XI, who has done well in similar conditions in the past.



Nasum has previously played two ODIs in the UAE, both at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium against Afghanistan, where he picked up three wickets at an economy rate of 2.81. "Nahid's omission was really surprising. But I was more shocked not to see Nasum in the playing XI. As India have so many right-handers, the team management should have picked Nasum in the contest," Aminul told The Daily Star.



56 hockey players sans Jimmy turn up for fitness tests

SPORTS REPORTER

As many as 56 players turned up to the fitness tests yesterday at the National Stadium ahead of Bangladesh national hockey team's preparation camp for April's AHF Cup in Indonesia.

Bangladesh Hockey Federation called up a total of 63 players bar experienced campaigner Rasel Mahmud Jimmy for the cooper test and among those that turned up, three failed the fitness test which was conducted by head coach Mamun Ur Rashid at the National Stadium in Paltan in the early morning.

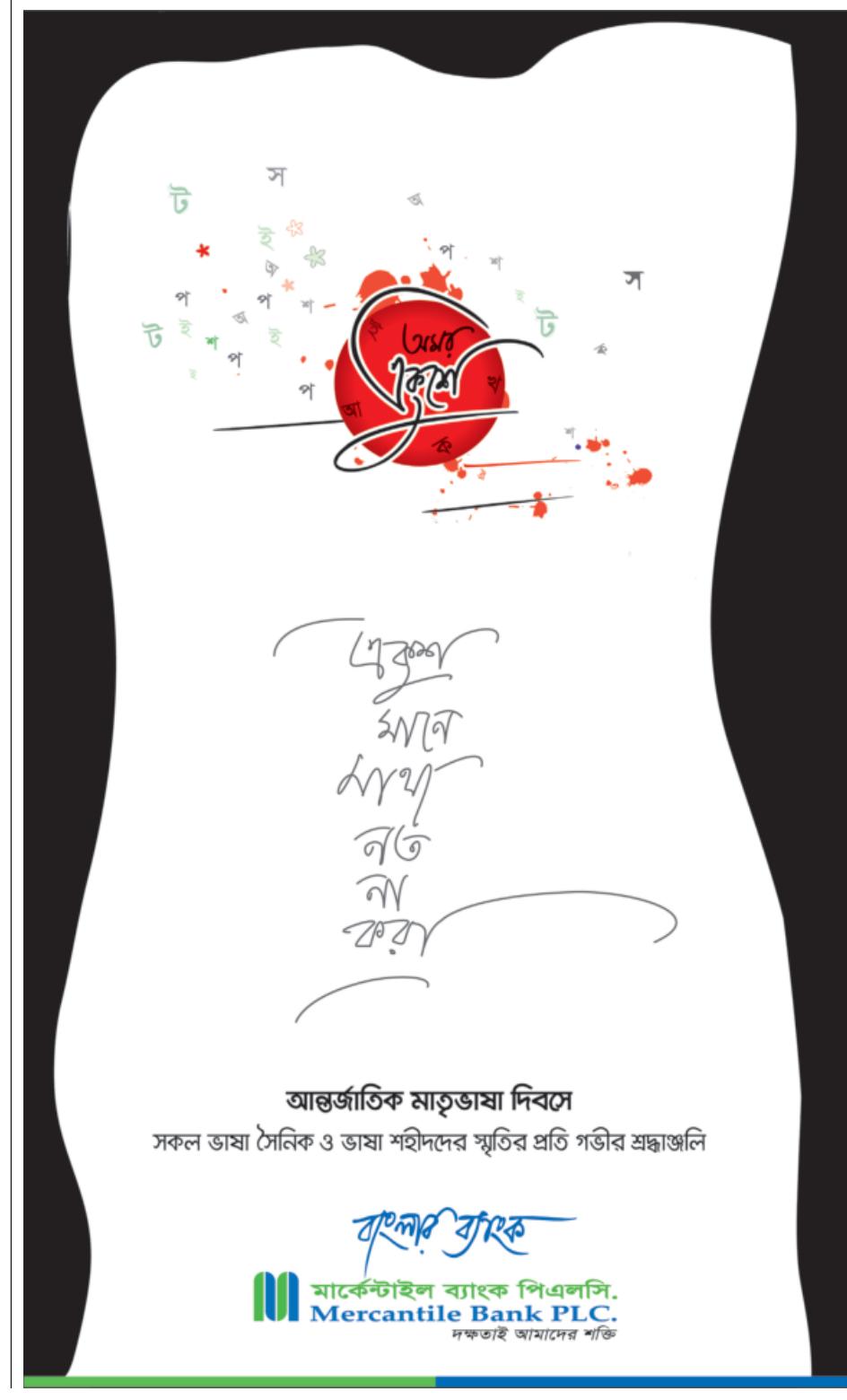
"Of 63 players, seven players including national players Shafiqul Alam Shishir and three U-21 national team's players – Azizur Rahman and Asaduzzaman Chand and Saddam Khan did not turn up for different reasons while only three out of 56 players failed to prove their fitness but they have still been kept in the squad," Mamun Ur Rashid told The Daily Star yesterday.

Mamun also informed that Jimmy was not called up for the fitness training.

The players who turned up to the cooper test, were divided into four groups to play two practice matches at Maulana Bhasani National Stadium and four more matches will be held today before 42 players are selected for the preliminary squad, the former national team player informed.

"After four trial matches which are to be played tomorrow [Friday], we will select 42 players who will report to the team management on February 24 as the training will get underway the next day," said the head coach.

The AHF Cup is scheduled to take place in Jakarta, Indonesia from April 17 to 25.



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