

A heartbroken city and an empty stadium

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Lahore

People call the city of Lahore 'The heart of Pakistan', owing to its rich history, cultural heritage and the fact that it's the capital of Punjab, the most influential province of the country.

Pakistan, a country where millions of people live and breathe cricket, is now reeling from the heartbreak of their unceremonious exit from the ICC Champions Trophy, a tournament where despite being the host, Pakistan has become an afterthought.

So, it should not be a surprise that the symbolic heart of the nation has also put on a somber-look, leaving no signs of the fact that the country is hosting its first major ICC event in 29 years and that Lahore is set to host a semifinal on Wednesday.

Silence is usually hard to find in Lahore, which is Pakistan's second most densely populated city, but on Sunday, it was there in abundance at the Gaddafi Stadium, as other than a few security personnel and some birds flying overhead, there was no other signs of life anywhere in the



premises.

The reason why the stadium was empty even though in only two days' time it will host the second semifinal of the ongoing ICC Champions Trophy, is because none of the four semifinalists were even in Pakistan yesterday.

All four confirmed semifinalists – India, New Zealand, South Africa and Australia – were in Dubai, waiting for the semifinal fixtures to be confirmed after

the last group phase match between India and New Zealand yesterday.

Australia and South Africa, who played their last Group B match in Lahore and Karachi respectively, left for Dubai after their respective matches and were waiting for the outcome of the Group A match between India and New Zealand to know who will be their semifinal opponent and where they would be playing it.

South Africa, who emerged Group B

champions, will take on Group A runners-up while Australia, the Group B runners-up, will face Group A champions.

Whether India finish top of Group A or in second position, they would play their semifinal in Dubai while New Zealand will play the other semifinal in Lahore.

Pakistan Cricket Board's director of media and communications Sami Ul Hasan yesterday confirmed The Daily Star that the teams who will play the semifinal in Lahore will arrive in the city on Tuesday, a day before the match.

"They will come in Pakistan on March 4 and will be doing a pre-match press conference before the match," Sami said.

"That was on the schedule and the schedule was approved by the ICC after consulting with all the participating countries," he said, admitting the irony of no teams being in Pakistan at the moment even though they are the hosts.

"That's a fair point. But you should ask this question to the ICC. They should answer this question," he concluded. If India fail to win their semifinal, Lahore will also host the final on March 9, otherwise, it will be played in Dubai.

Tigers' CT performance on agenda in BCB meeting

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) will hold the 18th board of directors meeting today with one of the main agendas being the performance of the national team in the ICC Champions Trophy.

While BCB directors said they were unaware of the agendas, sources have revealed that along with national team's performance in the Champions Trophy, where they got eliminated from the group phase without a win, the central contracts of the national team players will also be discussed.

According to media reports, some senior national team stars will not be part of the new central contracts.

Contracts of head coach Phil Simmons and senior assistant coach Mohammad Salahuddin are also in the agenda. Both of their contracts have expired after the Champions Trophy, however, the BCB is positive about renewing with both of them. The scheduling of domestic tournaments will also be discussed in today's meeting.

DPL BEGINS TODAY

Same old concerns in a new mould

SPORTS REPORTER

Dhaka Premier League (DPL), the most important tournament in the country's domestic calendar, begins today across venues in Dhaka with very little change from previous years as questions could be raised about its competitiveness owing to political influences.

The tournament's competitiveness especially comes into the limelight because political ties in the past garnered unseen advantages. Abahani dominated the recent era with many national team players thrust into the side.

What changed this year is that Mohammedan – Abahani's archrivals – and Legends of Rupganj have created strong teams, while the rest of the teams have found national team stars to be limited in stock.

Legends of Rupganj have recruited quite a few top-order batters from the national team, such as Soumya Sarkar and Tanzid Tamim. They also have Mahmudul Hasan Joy in the lineup, and team management sources yesterday told The Daily Star that he is being lined up to bat at number four, with Afif Hossain also in the squad.

Joy's case exemplifies how outside influences could impact the quality of a tournament and also a cricketer's career. Joy has always batted at the top, and



PHOTO: STAR

when a player is pushed into a middle-order role, it raises questions about the surplus of quality in a team. At the same time, the player himself has to adjust to this new role, making it more difficult for him to perform in the position where he aims to establish himself – as an opener.

This, in turn, reduces the effectiveness that the DPL should have in nurturing players who can serve the national team and the country's cricket.

Gulshan Cricket Club were promoted to the Premier Division last season, and former national team star Tamim Iqbal claimed to have arranged for investors for the club this season.

faced by players traveling to different grounds, such as those at BKSP in Savar. The heat factor could impact performance levels, especially as many cricketers would also be fasting during Ramadan.

Mohammedan official Tariqul Islam Titu mentioned that following a request made in a Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) meeting, the tournament would be moved to November next year.

Other than the timing, Titu found some positives in this DPL.

"Previously, for one team, the championship was almost guaranteed, while the rest were playing to be runners-up. Whether you talk about backdoor deals or umpiring, whenever we protested these issues, legal actions were taken against us," he added.

When asked whether Abahani's influence in past editions would now shift to Mohammedan due to the abundance of national team stars, he said: "Previously, other teams could not recruit national players, and Abahani would build their team with the maximum number of national team players or those on the fringes. Now, isn't it better that they won't have to play for just one team under any pressure? There was a fear that if you weren't in Abahani, you wouldn't get selected for the national team, but now it is open."

Tamim, who will be leading Mohammedan, will play the opening round's fixture against Gulshan Cricket Club at BKSP 3 today. "I am with them [Gulshan Cricket Club]. But the team is not mine, I just helped them get sponsors. So, I don't see any conflict of interest," Tamim told reporters in Mirpur yesterday.

Tamim's statement of being 'with them' sounds like a page out of the script from previous DPL editions, which were often marred due to conflicts of interest – particularly concerning club officials.

Tamim also highlighted the heat factor during the March-May window and the difficulties

Kapp wants more women's Test matches

REUTERS

There should be more women's Test cricket in order to improve standards in the game, South Africa all-rounder Marizanne Kapp has said.

Kapp, who made her international red-ball debut in 2014, scored 150 against England in 2022 but has played in only four Tests.

Since 2010, only 19 Test series have been played in women's cricket, of which nine have been England v Australia, with most of them one-off matches.

"It's the longest format of the game where you probably need the most skills," Kapp told Reuters.

"It can only help the women's game and how players grow as well because you learn so much about yourself and your skill and your game when you play the longest format.

"For me, it's about getting as much international women's cricket as possible. It doesn't matter the format. The more games and teams you get to play, the stronger it will get and the better everyone will get."

The Twenty20 format of the game is thriving with the introduction of cash-rich franchise leagues around the world. Kapp plays in the Women's Premier League (WPL) for Delhi Capitals who signed the 35-year-old for around \$181,000 in the inaugural auction in 2023.



Phillips 'the Superman'

AFP, Dubai

New Zealand's Glenn Phillips pulled off a stunning catch to dismiss India great Virat Kohli in the final group match of the Champions Trophy on Sunday.

Kohli fell for 11 off 14 balls after New Zealand invited India to bat first in Dubai.

But it was Phillips' fielding marvel that brought the match alive as he dived full stretch to his right at backward point and held on to the ball travelling at a fast pace from Kohli's bat off fast bowler Matt Henry. Kohli, 36, stood in disbelief for a few seconds before trudging back to the pavilion as the fans went silent.

Social media, however, was soon abuzz with reactions to the catch: "The Superman of the tournament", wrote one fan on X.

Phillips, fielding at backward point, grabbed another stunner earlier in the tournament when he stretched to take a left-handed catch, dismissing Pakistan skipper Mohammad Rizwan during the tournament opener in Karachi last month.

Hence, the 28-year-old all-rounder was asked before the India game whether he has glue on his hands.

"I wish I could say that I've got a special little glue tag that I use, but unfortunately, that's not the case. If anything, my palms are more sweaty than anything else," he said.



Atletico's focus now on CL clash with Real

Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone urged his players to quickly switch focus onto their Champions League clash with Real Madrid rather than getting carried away with Saturday's 1-0 home win over Athletic Bilbao that provisionally lifted them to the top of LaLiga. Atletico face Real in the first leg of the Champions League last-16 in a mouth-watering Madrid derby, something Simeone is wary of despite his team's good form. "We have a big game in the Champions League, and at the moment, we just have to focus on that and get well rested during these three days off," Simeone told a news conference. Hailing substitute Julian Alvarez, who sealed the victory minutes after coming on for Alexander Sorloth just before the hour mark against Athletic Bilbao yesterday, Simeone said: "We were lucky to have Julian in the second half and for him to finish the counter-attack the way he did." Atletico top LaLiga with 56 points, two clear of Barcelona, who host Real Sociedad on Sunday. Meanwhile, Real Madrid dropped a place to third in the standings after losing 2-1 at Real Betis on Saturday.

Women's kabaddi team aim to end 20-year drought

SPORTS REPORTER

With gold and silver apparently out of their reach, Bangladesh women's kabaddi team have set their sights on the bronze medal, subject to being placed in a favourable group in the seven-team Asian Women's Kabaddi Championship, scheduled for March 4-9 in Iran.

Defending champions India, runners-up Iran, Thailand, Nepal, Iraq, Malaysia and Bangladesh are scheduled to vie for the trophy of the sixth edition. Bangladesh's progress to the knockout rounds may depend on the grouping of the tournament, which has not been done yet.

If Bangladesh are placed in the same group with either India or Iran alongside fast-improving Nepal, then their hopes of winning a bronze medal or progressing to the semifinals may get a jolt.

Bangladesh's only medal in the history of this championship was a bronze in the inaugural edition in 2005.

Nepal have now become the new rivals of SA Games' two-time silver medallists Bangladesh, who lost to the Himalayan kingdom in the semifinals of the 2019 South Asian Games and in the group stages of the 2023 Asian Games.

"We can't deny that Nepal are now our new rivals because we lost to them in the



last two meetings, but we will try our best to win a bronze medal," assistant coach Shahnaz Parvin Maleka told The Daily Star over phone.

When asked about the 37-24 points defeat against Nepal in the 2023 Asian Games, Maleka said: "To be honest, the players panicked under pressure of delivering good results despite having a good Indian coach."

"However, I am confident after more than six weeks of training. Even though the time is not enough to prepare a team for such an assignment, I'm sure they will perform better than last year. This is a team comprising experienced and young

players who are motivated and committed to doing something good."

Former men's team captain Arduzzaman Munshi, who also worked as an assistant coach of the women's team, echoed the same sentiment, saying: "I have heard that female players could not hold their nerve in international tournaments but this time if the players can show their natural performance, they will be able to win at least a bronze medal."

The Bangladesh team, who are usually better in raids than in defence, will largely rely on players like Shraboni Mallick, Bristi Bishwas, Smriti Akter, Lucky Akter and Rupali to achieve their target.