



Hamza Choudhury, the biggest name in Bangladesh football, goes for a trademark tackle during his first practice session with the national team at the Bashundhara Kings Arena last night. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## Fahamedul 'needs more time'

SPORTS REPORTER

The public outcry over the departure of Italy-based Bangladeshi footballer Fahamedul Islam from the national team carried over to the second day with the sports adviser Asif Mahmud and Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president Tabith Awal having to weigh in on the issue yesterday. The BFF president, who also spoke with members of Bangladesh football supporters' group, reiterated that there was no syndicate pulling the strings from behind the scenes. "There is no scope for creating a syndicate in the football federation. Everyone will get a place on the basis of merit, if we get any such hints, the federation will take steps," Tabith was

quoted as saying in a youth and sports ministry press release.

"There is no crisis, we have not left out Fahamedul. He is talented, but we want to give him more time. The Bangladesh team has matches coming up in June at home, maybe we will see him on the field very soon. All I want to say to the supporters is that there is no need to be disappointed," he added. Coach Javier Cabrera, who had said that 18-year-old Fahamedul needed more time, stood firm in his stance in front of the media. "I knew him [Fahamedul] very well before calling him. When he arrived, he had been with us for one week and had the chance to train with the national team and we were able to meet him and know him better. But the conclusion I made is he still needs more time and that's all."



## 'It feels like our Messi is here'

Hamza's arrival brings fresh belief

SPORTS REPORTER

As Bangladesh gear up for their crucial Asian Cup Qualifiers fixture against India, captain Jamal Bhuiyan likened the excitement surrounding Hamza Choudhury's homecoming to that of a global superstar.

In yesterday's press conference at Hotel InterContinental, all eyes were on Hamza, who is set to make his highly anticipated debut for Bangladesh in Shillong on March 25. Yet, captain Jamal, the first expatriate footballer to represent Bangladesh at the international level, also drew considerable media attention.

"It feels like our [Lionel] Messi is here," Jamal said, emphasising the significance of the Premier League midfielder's inclusion in the squad -- set to leave for India this morning.

Having Hamza as the latest foreign-



That counts for a lot. I'm here to learn from them too. Inshallah, we will succeed, taking one step at a time," Hamza added.

Jamal believes Hamza's inclusion significantly strengthens their chances against India. Reflecting on his own debut, he predicts Hamza will experience a powerful moment when the national anthem plays.

"The way everyone is welcoming Hamza is incredible. It will inspire others around the world. On March 25, I'm sure when he hears the anthem, he'll get goosebumps," Jamal said.

With Hamza making himself available for Bangladesh, India, meanwhile, have welcomed back their legendary striker Sunil Chhetri from retirement at the age of 40. When asked who the better player is between Chhetri and Hamza, Jamal dismissed comparisons between the two.

"You can't compare Sunil Chhetri to Hamza. Sunil has done great things for India, but let's be honest -- Hamza is a Premier League player," he stated confidently, adding that Bangladesh are determined to beat India this time.

Head coach Javier Cabrera acknowledged Hamza's impact but stressed that mindset would be key.

"Now, to me, it is about getting ready and working on the mentality of how to beat them [India]. That is our eagerness, our meetings, the intensity of our practices, how much we demand of ourselves to reach the peak level and making sure we convince ourselves that we can make history on Indian soil," Cabrera said.

With Hamza's arrival injecting fresh confidence into the squad, Bangladesh are set to approach their India clash with renewed ambition.

## Majid's last-ball heroics secure Rupganj's first win

SPORTS REPORTER

Rupganj Tigers Cricket Club won a thrilling contest against ParTEX Sporting Club at BKSP Ground 3 yesterday thanks to Abdul Majid's heroic ton that culminated with a last-ball boundary which saw Rupganj win their first game in this year's Dhaka Premier League (DPL).

ParTEX openers Joyraj Sheikh (54 off 71 balls) and Rubel Mia (52 off 89) hit fifties but Mahmudul Hasan and Mohammad Al Amin Jr. took three wickets each to bowl them out for 223.

In reply, Majid carried Rupganj's hope, stitching together 107 runs for the third wicket with Asadullah Al Galib, who made 50 off 80. But Ahrar Amin then gave two quick breakthroughs to ParTEX as Rupganj slumped to 137 for four.

Rupganj needed 67 in the final 10 overs and lost two more wickets before reaching the last over with 10 runs needed. It boiled down to Majid needing three off the last delivery to win the game and four to complete his ton and he ticked both boxes, hitting a four to secure the win and completing a 123 ball ton.

Meanwhile, Gulshan Cricket Club won a tight contest by two wickets against Brothers Union at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur. Bishal Chowdhury's 75-ball 83 and Aich Mollah's 61-ball 65 helped Brothers to 290 for 9.

In reply, despite fifties from Elias Sunny (53 off 62) and Nacem Islam (50 off 60), Gulshan had slumped to 237 for 8.

With 47 needed in seven overs, Farhad Reza hit an unbeaten 36-ball 47 and Mehedi Hasan made an 18-ball 32, to take Gulshan across the line.

At BKSP Ground 4, Imrul Kayes hit an 85-ball 86 to help Agrani Bank to 294 for 7 against Shinepukur Cricket Club. In reply, Rayan Rafsan hit a 130-ball 106 but Shinepukur could only reach 248 for 5 as Agrani notched up a 46-run win.

<p><b>"We are a great nation. We can achieve anything if we put in the hard work and respect the process."</b></p> <p>Bangladesh footballer HAMZA CHOUDHURY</p>	<p><b>"The way everyone is welcoming Hamza is incredible. It will inspire others around the world."</b></p> <p>Bangladesh captain JAMAL BHUYAN</p>	<p><b>"Now, to me, it is about getting ready and working on the mentality of how to beat them [India]."</b></p> <p>Bangladesh coach JAVIER CABRERA</p>
---	--	--

groomed addition to the squad will greatly "boost" the men in red and green, believes Jamal, who made his debut for Bangladesh in a SAFF Championship fixture against Nepal in 2013.

"The excitement is five times greater than when I first arrived. Hamza is a Premier League player -- it's a huge boost

for us." Since arriving from England, Hamza has had a whirlwind introduction -- reuniting with family before diving into team activities.

After spending a busy couple of days, the 27-year-old also experienced a packed schedule yesterday, introducing

himself to his teammates, attending the official photoshoot and press conference, sharing moments with school footballers, and meeting the youth and sports adviser before taking part in team training in the evening.

At the Crystal Ballroom, packed an hour before the press conference, Hamza wore a smile throughout the press meet. While embracing the enthusiasm surrounding him, the Sheffield United player remained focused on the bigger picture.

"We are a great nation. We can achieve anything if we put in the hard work and respect the process. There's no rush -- we have time, Inshallah. I'll be playing for Bangladesh for years," he said when asked about his ambitions for the team.

"I come from a different league and style of play, but these players -- like Jamal -- have far more international experience.

## Blockbuster matches in Nations League tonight

STAR SPORTS DESK

Europe will witness four big mouthwatering battles tonight as eight of the best teams from the continent go head-to-head to stake places in the final four of the UEFA Nations League.

Some of these ties will not only shape up the final four spots in the competition but will also have repercussions on the European qualifying places for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

The Azzurri had something to prove. After a disappointing UEFA EURO 2024 campaign, Italy had begun to show positive signs under Luciano Spalletti. However, the road to the final four had become treacherous with the last-minute injury of Serie A's top scorer, Mateo Retegui. Adding to their woes, influential wing-back Federico Di Marco was also ruled out. Yet, Moise Kean's resurgence at Fiorentina offered a beacon of hope. With Sandro Tonali returning to reinforce the midfield, Italy believed they could make it three consecutive appearances in the semi-finals.

Spalletti's words ahead of their clash with Germany at San Siro set the tone. "Fear is just an emotion. Danger is different -- it happens at a specific moment."

Germany, though, were not without their own struggles. Coach Julian



Nagelsmann had to contend with the absences of Florian Wirtz, Kai Havertz, and Niclas Füllkrug. Despite the setbacks, the young manager remained confident. "We still have a very good squad. This quarterfinal is crucial, and we must play it with the right mindset."

Meanwhile, in Rotterdam, the Netherlands braced for a battle against the defending champions, Spain. Luis de la Fuente, Spain's mastermind behind their Nations League triumph two years ago and their EURO 2024 victory, was under no illusions. "The Netherlands are one of the best teams in Europe. We must be at our highest level."

Ronald Koeman, knowing the weight of history between the two teams, embraced the challenge. "This is a big game. Both



sides love to play attacking football, so expect two fantastic clashes."

Further south, at Stadion Poljud in Split, a rematch loaded with emotion was set between Croatia and France. Croatia's painful memories of the 2018 World Cup final loss to Les Bleus had been somewhat avenged by their historic 1-0 victory in Paris during the 2022 Nations League qualifiers. Zlatko Dalic's men were ready for another battle, while France, despite missing Marcus Thuram, remained formidable.

At Parken in Copenhagen, the night's final encounter saw Portugal face Denmark. Though perhaps less glamorous, Portugal's presence -- led by the ageless Cristiano Ronaldo -- ensured that this clash could steal the show.



## Raphinha ready to shine as Brazil gears up for Colombia clash

Raphinha was all smiles during Brazil's training session in Brasilia as the Selecao prepares for a crucial FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifier against Colombia tomorrow morning (6:45 AM Bangladesh time). With Neymar ruled out due to injury, all eyes will be on the Barcelona star, whose dazzling form has put him in Ballon d'Or conversations. A victory would be vital for fifth-placed Brazil, especially with a high-stakes encounter against Argentina looming next week.

PHOTO: AFP