

HAMZA'S INFLUENCE GROWS

as Bangladesh adapt to chilly Shillong

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh team have safely touched down in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, as they gear up for their AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers opener against India.

The team took off yesterday morning and, after a four-hour layover in Kolkata, landed in the hilly northeastern city in the afternoon.

"Everyone is safe and sound [after the journey]," team manager Amer Khan told The Daily Star over the phone.

"The players have now been at rest as there is no schedule of practice or other activities today [Thursday]," he added, noting that the squad has checked into the Vivanta Hotel.

Before departure, Amer had expressed optimism about the team's preparation, particularly after the inclusion of Hamza Choudhury, whose presence, he believes, has brought fresh energy to the squad.

"I think the atmosphere has changed with the inclusion of Hamza. It is an



additional inspiration, and it will help us make a good result," he said.

Tapu Barman, speaking ahead of the team's flight, was full of praise for

Hamza and the defender emphasised the importance of arriving early to acclimatise to Shillong's chilly conditions. "I think Hamza is a top player who is

highly physically fit, but I think we may take a bit of time to cope with Shillong's weather. That's why we are going there a bit earlier. We also have some final sessions in Shillong, and I think it will help us adjust among ourselves and to the weather before the match," he explained, making it clear that Bangladesh's mindset is set on securing a victory against India on March 25.

Meanwhile, head coach Javier Cabrera is still keeping his cards close to his chest regarding the final 23-man squad. Despite having 20 days of training under his belt, the Spaniard has travelled with 24 players, leaving out forward Piash Ahmed Nova, winger Arif Hossain, and defender Taj Uddin.

According to Amer, Cabrera will make his final call on the squad the day before the match.

With the clock ticking down, Bangladesh are keen to make the most of their time in Shillong as they brace for the crucial clash against the hosts.

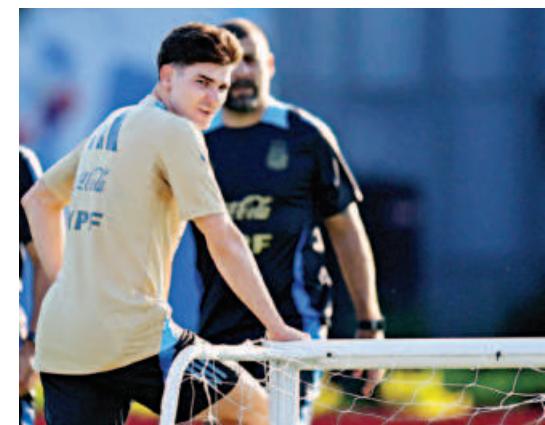


PHOTO: REUTERS

Alvarez aims to shine as Argentina face Uruguay

Having scored 23 goals in 44 competitive matches this season, Atletico Madrid's Julian Alvarez will be looking to lead his club form into Argentina's World Cup qualifier against Uruguay at the Centenario Stadium in Montevideo tomorrow (5:30 AM, Bangladesh Time). Argentina will be without several key players, including Lionel Messi, due to injuries. The reigning world champions currently lead the CONMEBOL qualifying standings with 25 points after 12 games.



'Relieved' Japan first to qualify for 2026 World Cup

AFP, Saitama

Japan became the first team to qualify for the 2026 World Cup after second-half goals from Daichi Kamada and Takefusa Kubo gave them a 2-0 win over Bahrain on Thursday.

The runaway Asian Group C leaders failed to sparkle on a chilly night in Saitama until Crystal Palace forward Kamada pounced for the opener in the

With three games left to play, Australia are in pole position to qualify out of Group C with Japan. Two goals in two minutes helped the Socceroos secure a 5-1 thrashing of Indonesia as Dutch legend Patrick Kluivert was well beaten in his first game in charge yesterday.

Even though South Korea conceded a goal with 10 minutes left in their 1-1 draw at home against Oman, they are still on course for the 2026 World Cup. South Korea still lead Asian qualifying Group B with 15 points and have three matches left to play.

66th minute.

Kubo added another in the 87th minute as Japan punched their ticket to next year's tournament in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

It will be their eighth straight World Cup appearance.

"I'm relieved that we could qualify at home in front of our supporters," said Kubo, before he and his team-mates addressed fans at Saitama Stadium and doused coach Hajime Moriyasu with water.

"This here is not our goal -- we want to compete against strong teams at the World Cup."

Australia's 5-1 home win over Indonesia earlier in the evening mean Japan would have clinched their place even with a draw.

But Kamada and Kubo made sure they did it in style in front of an expectant crowd of just under 60,000.

Japan's players sprinted onto the pitch at the final whistle and celebrated with the home supporters.

"We know this isn't normal and we had a lot of trouble qualifying last time. We're relieved and happy," said Kamada.

Japan have been in unstoppable form in the Asian third round of qualifiers and went into the game having won five and drawn one of their games so far.

Ban lifted but Shakib's future remains uncertain

SPORTS REPORTER

Shakib Al Hasan has successfully overturned his bowling ban and is once again allowed to bowl in competitive cricket, however, the uncertainties surrounding his international future are still very much present.

Shakib was handed a bowling ban by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) in last year's December following a one-match stint for English County side Surrey.

The 37-year-old's first two attempts to clear his action in Loughborough and Chennai were unsuccessful but the all-rounder finally successfully passed an independent reassessment of his bowling in Loughborough University earlier this month.

But just because his ban has been lifted does not mean all doubts about his future with the Bangladesh cricket team has cleared up.

Shakib's international future was thrown into uncertainty before the ban, as he was unable to return to the country to play his farewell Test in Mirpur against South Africa in October last year due to security concerns linked with his involvement with the ousted Awami League regime.

He was not picked for the away assignment against Afghanistan in the UAE and the tour of West Indies was subsequently excluded from the Champions Trophy squad, which was announced a month after Shakib's bowling ban was imposed.

Chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu had explained Shakib's exclusion from the Champions Trophy by saying, "when structuring the squad, we couldn't justify including him solely as a batter."

During the India tour last year, Shakib had said that he had already played his last T20I in the T20 World Cup held earlier that year, would like to retire with the Mirpur Test against the Proteas and then call time in ODIs with the Champions Trophy.

But after his Test and ODI swansong plans did not pan out, there has been no clear indication from the all-rounder about whether he is done with the Bangladesh team or not.

"He's been out of cricket and for someone to be in contention for the national team, the selectors may have to watch him play there [Dhaka Premier League]," a BCB official said on condition of anonymity.

Even after the bowling ban, Shakib could've played as an

all-rounder in the ongoing IPL as it is a BCB-run domestic competition and had initially signed up for Legends of Rupganj before withdrawing his name the very next day.

"We haven't communicated with him. Although we built our team around him, since our games are nearing the end, we are thinking whether we should bring him or not," a Legends of Rupganj official said regarding their confusion on taking Shakib back in.

Due to Shakib's political history as a former MP from Awami League, it's also uncertain whether he can return to Bangladesh and play competitive cricket.

"If he can arrive in the country, then he will be able to physically attend the transfer procedure. So, till now the lifting of the ban doesn't mean anything," another Rupganj official said.



Kohli's quest for lucky 18

AGENCIES

As the Indian Premier League (IPL) begins its 18th season, Virat Kohli sets out once again to claim the elusive title with Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB). The number 18 has been his identity since the IPL's inception in 2008, and fans hope this year will bring long awaited success.

The high-octane T20 competition kicks off tomorrow, packing 70 league matches into eight weeks before the top four teams battle in the playoffs, culminating in the final at Kolkata's Eden Gardens on May 25.

At 36, Kohli has already cemented his legacy, recently guiding India to Champions Trophy glory with 219 runs in five matches at an average of 54.50. However, his IPL dream remains unfulfilled, with RCB having finished as runners-up in 2009, 2011, and 2016.

"It's all about the pure joy, competition, and love for the game. As long as that remains, I'll continue playing," said Kohli, dismissing retirement speculation.

This season, RCB undergoes a leadership change, with Rajat Patidar replacing Faf du Plessis as captain. Kohli, still the team's talisman, will look to inspire a squad bolstered by Josh Hazlewood, Phil Salt, and Liam Livingstone.

RCB begins its campaign against defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders at Eden Gardens on Saturday. Despite a disastrous start last season—losing seven of their first eight matches—they made a stunning playoff run. This time, consistency is key.

With the IPL and Kohli both entering their 18th season, could fate finally favor RCB? The wait continues, but Kohli's passion remains unwavering.



Captains of all 10 Indian Premier League (IPL) teams pose during a photoshoot that took place near the iconic Gateway of India in Mumbai on Thursday. Pat Cummins, skipper of Sunrisers Hyderabad, was the odd one out, being the only overseas captain in the IPL 2025 season, which began under way with the game between Kolkata Knight Riders and Royal Challengers Bangalore at Eden Gardens on Saturday.

BFF approves increased budget of Tk 61.80 for 2025

SPORTS REPORTER

The executive committee of the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) approved a proposed budget of Tk 61.80 crores on Thursday for the current year, about four-and-a-half months after the BFF's annual general meeting refused to approve the proposed expenditure.

The BFF secretariat proposed a draft expenditure of Tk 61.52 crores in October 2024 for the upcoming year but it was refused by the delegates who cited the ambiguity and lack of transparency of the income and expenditure relating to the budget

and asked for another general meeting to approve the budget.

Tk 28 lakhs has been increased from October's proposed budget which had a Tk 14 crores deficit. However, BFF media committee chairman Amirul Islam Babu could neither disclose the total expenditure nor reveal the BFF's sources of income in which case, the deficit may increase or decrease.

Instead, Babu informed that the BFF is planning to organise a city school football tournament with the involvement of several Dhaka-based English-medium schools from April 12 at the Fortis FC ground.

