



Marking Bangladesh's 54th Independence Day, Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) arranged the traditional Independence Day Exhibition Cricket Match at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. Former national cricketers, divided into two teams -- BCB Red XI, led by Akram Khan, and BCB Green XI, led by Minhajul Abedin -- played a T10 match in which BCB Red XI claimed a 27-run victory. BCB Red XI opener Mehrab Hossain Opee was named the player of the match.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Hamza leads on and off the pitch, says Morsalin

ANISUR RAHMAN

Playing alongside English Premier League footballer Hamza Choudhury was the best-ever experience of his playing career, said Bangladesh forward Sheikh Morsalin.

The men in red and green returned home yesterday afternoon from Shillong following a goalless draw against India in their first Asian Cup Qualifiers fixture where Hamza, according to Morsalin, led the team on the pitch throughout the 90 minutes.

"India are better than Bangladesh in FIFA ranking but we are pretty similar in strength on the pitch. We proved it again yesterday [Tuesday]. Securing one point from the opening match is important for us," Morsalin told The Daily Star in the evening following a long journey from Shillong via Kolkata to the capital of Bangladesh.

Hamza is scheduled to leave for England this morning.

"We had a plan to secure three points and as per the plan, we created pressure on them from the beginning. But unfortunately we could not finish the moves. I think if we could have opened the scoring, more goals would have come," Morsalin said. "However, it is also important that we did not concede a goal as we defended well as a team."

Hamza was everywhere on the pitch -- from making crucial blocks and tackles to starting off attacking moves. Morsalin termed Hamza's debut performance as outstanding.

"It was a big experience for me to play alongside Hamza. I think it was the best-ever experience in my football career because he is an outstanding performer on and off the field. Hamza basically led Bangladesh team because



he instructed each and every player what to do and how to react," said the teenage footballer, who played in front of Hamza.

"He also instructed me to follow him and I tried to follow his instructions and reacted accordingly. I can't make you understand how big player he is," added Morsalin.

Not only on the pitch, Morsalin said he also benefited from Hamza's company, having stayed in the room next to Hamza's at the Vivanta Meghaylaya hotel in Shillong.

"As we wear No. 7 and No. 8 jerseys, our rooms were also next to each other's. He provided me with a lot of information, which he also did with the other players. It never felt like Hamza is an English Premier League player because he has no ego."

Bangladesh got off to a sparkling start against India by creating a couple of good chances within the first 15 minutes but neither Mojibur Rahman Jonny nor Shahriar Emon could capitalise on the opportunities provided. Morsalin himself fed Emon with a free header in front of goal but the latter failed to make that opportunity count.

"I could have been in place of Emon. If Emon did not jump, Tapu (Barman) bhai might have got the ball easily. But in the end it's all part of the game," the Bashundhara Kings midfielder said, adding that they felt under pressure after captain and centre-back Tapu left the ground following a hamstring injury early in the game.

Asked what they would like to achieve in the home game against Singapore on June 10, Morsalin said: "Now we want to focus on the front domestic engagement for our clubs and then think of the next match when it gets closer."



Scaloni's Argentina SHATTER BRAZIL'S PRIDE

In a game charged with emotion and intensity at Estadio Mas Monumental, Argentina dismantled Brazil 4-1 in a commanding World Cup qualifier display, stamping their ticket to the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Even before kickoff, Argentina had secured qualification thanks to Uruguay's draw with Bolivia -- but Lionel Scaloni's side showed no signs of complacency. Dominating from the start, the reigning world champions silenced pre-match trash talk, especially from Brazil winger Raphinha, and underlined their supremacy in South American football. Goals from Julian Alvarez, Enzo Fernandez, Alexis Mac Allister, and Julian Simeone capped off a fiery yet clinical performance. Brazil's Matheus Cunha offered a brief spark, but it was not enough to mask their ongoing struggles. Argentina top the CONMEBOL standings, while Brazil (fourth with 21 points) face growing pressure under coach Dorival Junior.

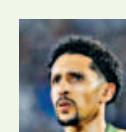


"We'll beat them up... Absolutely! Beat them up! On the pitch and off the pitch if we have to. For sure, I'm going to (score a goal against Argentina). I'm going in with everything I've got," Raphinha said before the game.



This was Brazil's worst-ever defeat in a World Cup Qualifying fixture -- the first time the five-time world champions conceded four goals in a qualifier.

This was Argentina's most dominant win over Brazil since a 3-0 victory in the 1964 Nations Cup.



"What we did here today can't happen again... It's embarrassing. I'm sorry for our fans."

Marquinhos
Brazil Captain

ARGENTINA'S REPLY

"I forgive Raphinha... With or without statements, we were going to play our game."

-- Lionel Scaloni, Argentina coach

"You [Raphinha] don't have to talk beforehand... We continue to show ourselves every day."

-- Leandro Paredes, Argentina midfielder

"That way of speaking [Raphinha] adds spice... but we, with humility and hard work, played a great game."

-- Julian Alvarez, Argentina forward

"We've been the best team for about five or six years. Let him [Raphinha] respect us."

-- Rodrigo De Paul, Argentina midfielder

'Great' Taremi helps Iran confirm World Cup ticket

REUTERS

Iran coach Amir Ghalenoei praised Mehdi Taremi's impact after the Inter Milan striker scored twice in a 2-2 draw with Uzbekistan on Tuesday that secured qualification for the 2026 World Cup finals.

Taremi has endured an inconsistent season due to injury since joining the Italian side from Porto on a free transfer last summer but his two goals made all the difference for the national team in Tehran.

"A great player must help both technically and physically," Ghalenoei said.

Taremi is one of them, and even though he plays for a great team and is not in good condition and could have missed the season, he played and was with the team and played for the people.

"He became the best player on the field and I am happy that, in most games, he is the best player on the field from the Iranian national team."

Taremi's first goal at the Azadi Stadium came in the 52nd minute when he smashed home a volley to cancel out Hojimat Erkinov's 16th-



minute opener for the visitors.

And while Abbasbek Fayzullaev restored Uzbekistan's lead a minute later, it was Taremi who struck from close range seven minutes from time to secure the point Iran required to secure their place at the finals in North America.

He has started only 14 times since his switch to Italy after five seasons as a prolific scorer in Portugal for Rio Ave and Porto but his exploits on Tuesday helped

Iran seal a fourth consecutive trip to the World Cup.

With their place now assured, Ghalenoei has set his sights on taking the Iranians into the knockout rounds of the expanded World Cup for the first time.

Iran have never advanced beyond the group phase in their previous six appearances, winning just three out of their 18 matches at the finals.

"Qualification was not an easy task," said Ghalenoei. "Look at the capabilities of other teams and you will see that the players were able to achieve this qualification through difficult circumstances."

Meanwhile, after Australia beat China 2-0 to boost their chances of automatic qualification on Tuesday, Saudi Arabia stayed in touch in Group C with a goalless draw in Japan.

Australia, who second in Group C on 13 points -- three points ahead of Saudi Arabia -- host Japan and travel to Saudi Arabia for their final qualifiers in June, leaving the race for the second direct qualification place on a knife edge.



A destructive Tim Seifert, who made an unbeaten 97 off 38 deliveries, ensured New Zealand made short work of their 129-run target to win the final T20I against Pakistan by eight wickets in Wellington on Wednesday and take the series 4-1. The teams now move onto a one-day international series starting in Napier on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP