

# ‘If we don’t score big, we don’t stand a chance’

Bangladesh women’s team will be spending this year’s Eid-ul-Fitr not with their families but at a preparation camp in Mirpur as they are busy in last minute preparations before leaving for Lahore, Pakistan on April 3 for the ICC Women’s World Cup Qualifiers, scheduled to be held on April 5-19. On Thursday, skipper **Nigar Sultana Joty** talked to **The Daily Star’s Samsul Arefin Khan** regarding her team’s preparation, expectations and chances at the event. The excerpts are as follows:

**The Daily Star (DS):** Despite being in Bangladesh, you won’t get to celebrate Eid with your families this year...

**Nigar Sultana Joty (NSJ):** We’re kind of use to it. Initially we felt bad but now it doesn’t sting as much. As this is our full-time job, sacrificing these things is not such a big thing for us.

**DS:** How have the preparations been for the World Cup qualifiers?

**NSJ:** The most important thing was the [Women’s Dhaka] Premier League. We have played on very good wickets. There were good scores and there were a few competitive games as well. As we will compete in the same format [50 overs], it was very crucial for us. I think playing matches is more important than practice. The more matches you have played, the better impact it will have in international cricket.

**DS:** Will Pakistan and West Indies be Bangladesh’s main obstacle in the qualifiers?



**NSJ:** I think all the teams are going there to qualify for the main event. I think except Pakistan, the condition will be difficult for all others. If you see the stats, West Indies and Pakistan are ahead of the other teams. But Ireland is also a good side. If you win every match, only then you can qualify.

**DS:** Are there any special plans regarding the wickets in Lahore?

**NSJ:** Our new batting coach David Hemp was the head coach of the Pakistan women’s team. He is well versed about

the wickets and condition in Pakistan. Pakistan is usually a batting paradise. If you can’t score big, irrespective of how strong your bowling is, you can’t defend the total. If we can score at least 240-run plus on a regular basis, we will have a very good chance.

**DS:** The team also has a new head coach in Sarwar Imran. What’s your assessment of him so far?

**NSJ:** I first had him as a coach in 2016. We were quite afraid of him at the time. Still, we are scared of him. He is a senior

coach and a well-organised person. Most importantly, he is a Bangladeshi coach, so there is no communication gap with the girls which I feel was needed.

**DS:** Some top WDPL performers were picked for the qualifying event whereas some regular players like Murshida Khatun were overlooked. Do you feel this is how the team should go about selection moving ahead?

**NSJ:** Those who got dropped from the side, their performance were monitored in the last 2-3 series. Those who performed really well in the WDPL were included. Like off-spinner Sumona, who was the highest wicket-taker. Batters like Ishma was also included as she batted with a healthy strike-rate at the top-order. We often see our top-order batters struggle to score at a good pace and then the pressure falls on the middle-order. Because of these specific reasons, specific players were included in the side.

**DS:** Have Nahida Akter and Marufa Akter, who couldn’t play in the WDPL, fully recovered?

**NSJ:** Nahida is 90-95 percent fit. She will join the side very soon. I think she has already started bowling. Marufa’s recovery is also going well.

**DS:** How confident is the team about qualifying for the World Cup?

**NSJ:** Everyone is in good touch and if we can perform team-wise, we will do well. If we can apply our training in the matches, we can definitely qualify.

## ‘Humble’ Hamza captivates Bangladesh

STAR SPORTS DESK

In a country where football fans have long craved a new hero, Hamza Choudhury arrived – not with swagger, but with a smile. He left the country for England yesterday, with a similar grin on his face and a promise to return in June for Bangladesh’s next Asian Cup qualifying fixture, against Singapore on June 10.

The English Premier League midfielder, currently with Sheffield United in Championship, touched down in Bangladesh with little more than a two-day visit planned to his ancestral home in Habiganj. But what followed was a national embrace. From heartfelt welcomes in rural Sylhet to a packed stadium in the Asian Cup Qualifiers clash against India, Hamza became the beacon of hope for a football-hungry nation.

Yet, it wasn’t just his skills on the pitch that won hearts – it was his character.

Bangladesh cricket star Liton Das summed it up in a simple yet touching social media post on Thursday. Sharing a picture with Hamza, Liton wrote: “It was wonderful to meet Hamza Choudhury – such a humble person & what a player! Hoping for a brighter future for Bangladesh football with him in the team.”

That one word – humble – has echoed through every corner of Bangladesh’s football fraternity.

Sohel Rana, one of Bangladesh’s most experienced midfielders, couldn’t help but be amazed by how seamlessly Hamza blended in. “He has adapted to the team very quickly – it feels like he has been playing with us for a long time,” Sohel said. “Despite being an English Premier League player, he has no ego.”

From the dressing room to training grounds, his presence has felt more like a long-lost teammate returning home than a star guest from one of football’s biggest stages.

What truly sets Hamza apart is his eagerness to learn. “I come from a different league and style of play, but these players – like Jamal – have far more international experience. That counts for a lot. I’m here to learn from them too,” he had said.

At a time when Bangladesh football has been struggling to rediscover its pulse, Hamza’s presence – both as a player and as a person – feels like a revival. The goalless draw against India in the Asian Cup Qualifier may not have lit up the scoreboard, but it was enough to show one thing clearly: Bangladesh football is finally dreaming again.

And, one thing that would assure the entire country are the following words from Hamza: “I’ll be playing for Bangladesh for years.”



## Ridoy regrets his costly miss in India draw

ANISUR RAHMAN

Since Bangladesh and India’s high-voltage clash in the 2027 Asian Cup qualifiers third-round fixture ended in a goalless draw on Tuesday, discussions have centred on the chances Bangladesh squandered in Shillong.

The outcome could have been different had Bangladesh taken their early opportunities. Within the first 15 minutes of the game, the visitors carved out three golden chances, aided by a fumble from Indian goalkeeper Vishal Kaith. Yet, neither Mojibur Rahman Jonny, Shahriar Emon nor Mohammad Ridoy could get it right.

Jonny and Emon missed before Ridoy had the simplest of chances to put Bangladesh ahead in the 12th minute. Kaith’s clearance struck defender Shakil Ahad Tapu, rebounding to an unmarked Ridoy in front of an open goal. However, his feeble strike allowed Subhasish Bose to clear the danger.

“I did not think I would get the ball in this situation. I should have finished it calmly. I could not shoot the ball properly,” Ridoy told *The Daily Star* yesterday.

“We made a good start by creating chances from the outset. If I could have scored the goal at that time, it could have been better for the team. So, I regret missing that chance,” admitted the defensive midfielder, who is not known for his goal-scoring prowess, as evident by his only two goals in 58 domestic matches played over six seasons.

The 23-year-old Abahani midfielder – who has been playing under Cabrera for 19 consecutive matches, excluding the second friendly against the Maldives last year – also recognised the impact on Bangladesh’s standing in Group C, which also involves Singapore and Hong Kong.

“If we could have taken all three points, we would have had an edge in the group as the other match also ended in a draw. However, our next target is to secure all three points in the home matches, including the one against India [later this year].”

A bright spot for Bangladesh was English Premier League midfielder Hamza Choudhury, whose leadership lifted the team. “I think there is nothing to say about the level he [Hamza] belongs to, you know. He always spoke positively inside the ground. He also motivated and encouraged each of our players. A different kind of spirit worked inside the players while a player like Hamza was a teammate,” Ridoy informed.

Hamza was constantly seen directing teammates, ensuring they stayed composed. Ridoy shared his advice:

“He always asked everyone to stay calm rather than rush, to not blame anyone for any mistake... ‘Just follow the team rules and progress slowly.’ He also asked everyone to talk to each other; then the game would be easy for us.”

Determined to learn from their missed opportunities, Ridoy and teammates are eager to make amends and keep their Asian Cup qualification hopes alive by aiming to top their group, knowing that every game – until March 31 next year – is crucial in their pursuit of a place in the main event in Saudi Arabia.

## Search Committee members threaten resignation over NSC’s decision

SPORTS REPORTER

The National Sports Council (NSC) yesterday formed three more ad hoc committees of different sports federations, dissolving the present committees.

However, the Search Committee, responsible for recommending names for the ad hoc committees, has raised objections regarding the Bangladesh Archery Federation (BAF) committee. The controversy centers on the retention of long-serving General Secretary Kazi Rajib Uddin Ahmed Chapal. In response, members of the Search Committee have threatened to resign.

“This is not the committee we recommended; it is the committee of Mr. Aminul Islam (NSC Secretary). If they do not withdraw the committee, we will resign because we are not fit for the Search Committee,” Search Committee Convener Jobaydur Rahman Rana told *The Daily Star*.

He further added, “Retaining Rajib Uddin Ahmed Chapal as general secretary contradicts the policy outlined by the Youth and Sports adviser.” He also hoped that NSC would issue a new circular withdrawing the ad hoc committee announcement.

Previously, Youth and Sports Adviser Asif Mahamud had stated that an individual could hold key positions, such as president or general secretary, for a maximum of two successive terms. However, Chapal has served as BAF secretary for over 15 years.

He also said that they recommended the president of the archery ad hoc committee (Dr. Md. Mokhles Ur Rahman, senior secretary of the Ministry of Public Administration) as per the request of the NSC secretary.

Meanwhile, the NSC has also formed two additional ad hoc committees for the Bangladesh Kho Kho Federation and the Bangladesh Baseball and Softball Association.

With the formation of these three new ad hoc committees, the total number of new ad hoc sports bodies now stands at 24.

## WOMEN’S ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

## Bangladesh drawn in strong group

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh were drawn with hosts Myanmar, Bahrain, and Turkmenistan in Group C of the upcoming AFC Women’s Asian Cup 2026 Qualifiers as the draw of 34-team, split into eight groups, was held in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The qualifiers will be played from June 23 to July 5. The champions of each group will advance to join automatic qualifiers China, Korea Republic, Japan and Australia in the 12-team final round to be held from March 1 to 26, 2026.

It is set to be a tough challenge for Bangladesh. Only Turkmenistan, ranked 141, are behind 133rd-ranked Bangladesh. Placed 55th in the FIFA rankings, Myanmar are the top-ranked side in this group, while Bahrain are 92nd in the rankings.

“We will be trying our best to get out of the group,” Bangladesh Football Federation women’s wing chairman Mahfuza Akter Kiron hoped.

The local game’s governing body has already decided to start the preparation camp of the national women’s team from April 6 with 55 players, including 18 senior players who were not part of two friendly matches against United Arab Emirates.

Kiron also informed that they are trying to arrange two friendly matches before starting the AFC Women’s Cup Qualifying campaign in Myanmar in June.

## Gerrard or McManaman: Who will TAA follow as Real knock?

AFP, Liverpool

Trent Alexander-Arnold’s proposed move from Liverpool to Real Madrid has split opinions on whether a local hero can leave Merseyside without a lasting stain on his legacy.

Alexander-Arnold joined the Reds 20 years ago as a six-year-old and has gone on to win a clean sweep of Premier League, Champions League, FA Cup, League Cup, UEFA Super Cup and Club World Cup titles.

His status is reflected in a mural that stands just metres from the club’s Anfield stadium, emblazoned with the quote: “I’m just a normal lad from Liverpool whose dream has come true.”

However, how he will be remembered for years to come in his home city will for many be dictated by decision he takes in the coming weeks over his future.

In Spain, Alexander-Arnold, whose Liverpool contract expires at the end of the season, would be lining up each week alongside his close friend and England colleague Jude



Bellingham, among a cast of stars also including Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius Junior. The spotlight could also offer Alexander-Arnold the chance to fulfil his dream of becoming the first full-back to win the Ballon d’Or. “I believe I can (win it),” Alexander-Arnold told Sky Sports earlier this season.

By running his contract down, Alexander-Arnold is in a strong

position to make millions from a signing-on bonus in lieu of Madrid having to pay a huge transfer fee.

And he can argue there is little more to be gained by staying as Liverpool are 12 points clear at the top of the Premier League, meaning by the time his current deal expires, Alexander-Arnold should be a two-time English champion to go with six

other major trophies.

“It’s about his legacy at Liverpool and how he is seen. Do you want to be seen like (Steven) Gerrard or (Steve) McManaman?” former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher, himself a one-club legend, said of Alexander-Arnold’s choice.

McManaman made the move from Liverpool to Real Madrid on a free transfer back in 1999. He won two Champions Leagues and two LaLigas in his four years and yet is being used as the counter argument encouraging Alexander-Arnold to stay.

“He (McManaman) went to Real Madrid and won cups but he is not adored. If (Alexander-Arnold) stays, he will be remembered as one of the best to play for the club and not far behind Gerrard.”

Should he stay, Alexander-Arnold, vice-captain of Liverpool, could be front and centre of trophy lifts in years to come as a local lad turned legend. But Liverpool are just the latest club to learn that the magnetism of Madrid is hard to resist.