



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## An evening of evoked memories and renewed belief

ANISUR RAHMAN

Anticipation was high, yet the scenes at the newly renovated National Stadium still amazed as the entire premises transformed into a sea of white -- the color of Bangladesh's home jersey -- as Bangladesh prepared to face Singapore in a much-hyped Asian Cup Qualifier yesterday.

For some experts and fans from all over the country, it was a sign of football's revival in Bangladesh. For others, the buzzing atmosphere evoked memories from two decades ago.

"I think the atmosphere is similar to what we witnessed during the SAFF Championship final in 2003," said former goalkeeper Biplob Bhattacharjee, part of that SAFF winning squad.

Biplob, among the sea of white-clad fans in the stands, attributed the renewed enthusiasm to the inclusion of expatriates recently joining the team.

"This sudden change in public interest must be credited to players like Hamza [Choudhury], Shamit Shome, and Fahmedul [Islam]. They transformed the team's outlook and reignited people's dreams about our football," he said.



For Bangladesh women's team captain Afeida Khandakar, the scene brought back memories from her own experiences.

"The full stadium looked different. I only remember such a full house when the women's team played the SAFF Championship in Kamalapur," said the 18-year-old, eagerly awaiting to see Hamza, Shamit, and others.

Spectators arrived early, hoping to secure their seats well before the 5:00 pm deadline set by the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF), which had issued six-point spectator guidelines based on lessons from the recent FIFA friendly against Bhutan.

Enthusiasm was high as fans showed little concern for the long wait -- especially after Hamza's much-anticipated debut

against India earlier this year.

Among the crowd were children and elderly alike, many wearing the new all-white Bangladesh kit. The stadium grounds turned festive, with co-sponsors setting up fan zones, selfie stages, and mini games, including a goalpost challenge with prizes.

A group of Bashundhara Kings supporters near Dainik Bangla More, proudly wearing national jerseys,



traveled from districts such as Cumilla, Munshiganj, and Satkhira.

"We're always there -- from domestic leagues to international friendlies," said Mehdi Hasan.

Arafat Sheikh from Munshiganj shared a bittersweet thought: "My father wanted

to come today, but I had only one ticket."

For Sheikh Rabiu Islam of Satkhira, this was a first. "I've never seen the national team live. With Hamza and Shamit [Shome] joining, this team feels different. There's hope."

Satkhira's Asadul Islam, who had stopped watching football years ago, returned with renewed faith. "I think Bangladesh will fight hard today. Afeida Khandakar (women's team captain) gave me this ticket. I couldn't miss it."

Three friends -- Samiul, Arif, and Zahid -- came from Cumilla to see Hamza, Jamal, and Shamit live. Samiul noted his Tk 400 ticket was offered for resale at Tk 2,000, but he declined. "Watching from the gallery is priceless," he said.

Inside, former national players, women's national team members, and referees entered with complimentary tickets. Outside, some desperate fans still searched for tickets.

Much waiting and anticipation culminated yesterday evening. However, as Mohammedan coach and former national striker, Alfaz Ahmed, said, "a victory can erase the pain of spectators' long wait." Unfortunately, that was not the case as the hosts suffered a 2-1 defeat.

## Australia aim to defend crown against hungry South Africa

REUTERS

Australia will have to dust off the cobwebs but are still fancied to successfully defend their World Test Championship crown against equally ring-rusty South Africa in the final at Lord's, starting on Wednesday.

The five-day clash comes on the heels of a plethora of limited-overs cricket over the last five months and both teams have been scrambling to prepare for a high-profile return to the red-ball game.

Australia have not played a Test since beating Sri Lanka in Galle in February when

they made sure of a top-two finish in the standings from results for the 2023-25 WTC cycle.

South Africa were assured of top place when they won their last Test against Pakistan at home in January to book a first-ever finals appearance.

It came on the back of a run of seven successive wins, but the fact they did not play against the Aussies or England has seen their achievement dismissed as too easy.

Former England captain Michael Vaughan said they reached the final "on the back of

beating pretty much nobody," which was a result of the lopsided Test schedule where Australia, England, and India dominate and South Africa elect to play more financially lucrative limited-overs internationals.

But an upset win for South Africa could change that.

"It's the biggest thing in this team's existence. It's the biggest thing for South African cricket at the moment," said their coach Shukri Conrad.

Meanwhile, June 16 has been reserved as an additional day if there are any weather delays.



It's a trophy we've spoken a lot about over the last couple of years. Test cricket is my favourite format. You've got to basically win in all different conditions to make it into this final. If we can retain that mace, that's a pretty awesome thing for this team.

Australia captain Pat Cummins

Enough has been spoken about that [they played only 12 Tests over the two-year 2023-25 cycle while Australia played seven more] to be honest. We are quietly confident going into this game that we can pull one over them. We're a confident bunch, we play well as a unit, and if there are any vulnerabilities among them (Australia), I'm sure we'd be able to exploit that.

South Africa coach Shukri Conrad

## Lack of quality WC preparation a concern for Tigresses

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

With the ICC Women's World Cup set to get underway in 110 days' time in India and Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, unlike other teams, are sticking only with skill and fitness camps on home soil.

This exposes a lack of vision from the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), which failed in recognising the players' and selectors' urge for preparing with international matches for a side that were the last to qualify for the eight-team mega event by finishing second in the qualifiers in Pakistan's Lahore in April.

"Whatever work you do, if your preparation isn't up to the mark, you won't get the expected result," vice captain Nahida Akter told The Daily Star yesterday.

What makes it worse is that the team's preparation itinerary seems to remain unchanged, with the Tigresses now set for a two-week-long skill camp, which is set to begin on June 13 in Mirpur, only because the BCB made late communications with other boards.

"All the teams are currently



playing, and we also want to play matches. But as all the teams are currently busy, I think that's why the board is finding it hard to arrange international matches before the World Cup," added Nahida, who plans to prepare herself through the upcoming Bangladesh Women's Cricket League, which is scheduled to take place in August, and national team camps.

Opener Farzana Hoque Pinky also feels the necessity of more organised training schedules

in the coming days, which she believes to give their preparation a good shape before the World Cup.

"After the World Cup qualifiers, we are taking preparation for the main event by doing skill and fitness camps. But, still, international matches are international matches. If we can play one or two series before the World Cup, we can have better preparation," she said.

"If we can do quality practice, we can expect to do better. The

World Cup isn't an easy place to perform. If we are more organised with our preparation, it would have been better," said Farzana, who also feels the necessity of having full-time batting, bowling, and fielding coaches in the team.

The women's team is currently looked after by head coach Sarwar Imran, while Nasiruddin Faruque (batting coach), Humayun Kabir Shahin (spin coach), and Alamgir Kabir (pace bowling coach) are assisting him.

When contacted, BCB's women's wing chairman, Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, informed that they are not thinking of bringing change in the coaching set-up before the World Cup, but claimed that they are still communicating with other cricket boards to give the team some international exposure before the World Cup.

"Arranging international matches was important as it could give a similar vibe as part of World Cup preparation. We are still trying to arrange something differently, like playing against a top team's B side. But nothing is confirmed yet," Fahim told The Daily Star.

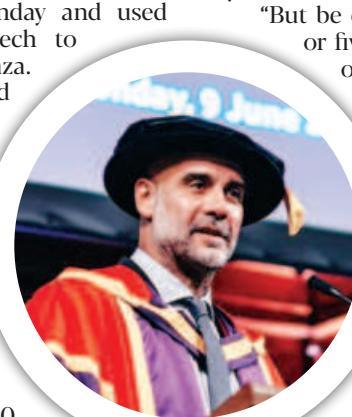
## 'Gaza war hurts my whole body'

REUTERS, Manchester

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola received an honorary doctorate from the University of Manchester on Monday and used his acceptance speech to address the war in Gaza.

The war erupted after Hamas-led militants took 251 hostages and killed 1,200 people, most of them civilians, in the October 7, 2023 attack. Israel's military campaign has since killed more than 54,000 Palestinians, most of them civilians, according to health authorities in Gaza.

"It's so painful what we see in Gaza. It hurts my whole body," Guardiola said. "It's not about ideology. It's not about whether I'm right, or you're wrong. It's just about the love of life, about the care of your neighbour."



"Maybe we think that we see the boys and girls of four years old being killed by the bomb or being killed at the hospital because it's not a hospital anymore. It's not our business."

"But be careful. The next four or five year old kids will be ours. Sorry, but I see my kids, Maria, Marius and Valentina. When I see every morning since the nightmare started the infants in Gaza, and I'm so scared."

Guardiola was recognised for his contribution to the city, including guiding his team to six Premier League titles in nine years with the club, along with his charitable work through his Guardiola Sala Foundation.

The 54-year-old Spaniard was presented with his honorary degree by the University's Chancellor Nazir Afzal at Whitworth Hall.