

SAFF U-17 WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP

## Bangladesh off to winning start despite 'mistakes'

SPORTS REPORTER

Alpi Akter scored twice and Sauravi Akanda Prity added another as Bangladesh started their SAFF U-17 Women's Championship campaign with a 3-1 win against hosts Bhutan at the Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu on Wednesday.

It was a comfortable victory for the charges of Mahbubur Rahman Litu, the assistant coach stepping in for Peter Butler, but far from a convincing one for a team that had brushed aside the same opposition with a 6-0 drubbing on way to claiming the title in the under-16 event last year.

The girls in red and green had their chances though to claim a much bigger margin of victory, but Bhutan goalkeeper Kelzang Wangmo was in inspired form, especially in the first half, as she thwarted a number of goal-bound attempts from Bangladesh.

It started in the second minute when Wangmo made a one-handed diving save to deny Alpi the opening goal



before denying Prity from a one-on-one situation in the 20th minute. The Bhutan shot-stopper produced another fine save to deny Alpi again in the 28th minute before the Bangladesh No. 9 saw her header cleared off the goalline by a Bhutan defender.

Prity, who had emerged as the top-scorer and the best player last year, hit

the crossbar from the edge of the box in the 42nd minute before finally breaking the deadlock in the third minute of stoppage time, heading in Shiuly Roy's lob as Wangmo and two defenders were caught in a tangle.

Alpi doubled Bangladesh's lead nine minutes after restart with a powerful shot from the edge of the box following

a nice little pirouette as Bangladesh started to breathe easy. However, two unfortunate injuries – one for midfielder Moumita Khutun in the first half and another for Prity early in the second half, debilitated Bangladesh's attacking options.

It was trouble at the back too as goalkeeper Meghla Roy's fumble in the 62nd minute helped Bhutan reduce the margin, courtesy of Rinzin Choden's fine finish. Alpi, however, restored Bangladesh's two goal cushion four minutes later, bundling in a corner on the second attempt before Mamoni Chakha had a shot cleared off the goalline by a Bhutan player.

Coach Litu expressed his concern over the mistakes that the team made as Bangladesh will face India, who beat Nepal 7-0 in the first match on Wednesday, in their second match of the four-team competition on Friday.

"I think we made a few mistakes, especially early on but we came back well. We will work on the mistakes we have made," Litu said.

## Jessy to officiate in Netherlands series

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh umpire Shathira Jakir Jessy will be officiating in the Tigers' upcoming T20I series against the Netherlands.

Jessy, who was earlier informed that she is set to officiate in the upcoming women's ODI World Cup in Sri Lanka and India in September, was announced as the fourth umpire in the first and third T20Is of the Netherlands series. She will be in charge as a TV umpire in second T20I.

"I would like to thank Bangladesh Cricket Board for giving me an opportunity to officiate in a men's national team series for the first time. I think it will help me to take good preparation for the upcoming World Cup," Jessy told The Daily Star yesterday.

Tanvir Ahmed, Masudur Rahman Mukul, and Morshed Ali Khan have been named on-field umpires for the series, which will take place in Sylhet on August 30, September 1, and 3, respectively.

Jessy has umpired in the Dhaka Premier League previously and has also officiated in the Women's Asia Cup, the ICC Women's World Cup Qualifiers held in Pakistan in April, and during the recent men's Emerging Team's series between Bangladesh and South Africa.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh team are in Sylhet and have begun their skill camps. The Tigers will play a practice match against BCB HP on August 26.

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

Women's cricket in Bangladesh still receives far less attention than men's, and their preparation continues to lag. Yesterday's Challenge Cup match in Savar showed just how poorly the team's arrangements have been, given a quadrennial global event is fast-approaching.

In a match designed to help fine-tune the Tigresses ahead of September–November's ICC Women's World Cup, national captain Nigar Sultan Joty-led team – named Red Team, which include several players from the 50-over set-up – lost by 87 runs to Bangladesh men's U-15 side, a bunch who had never played a white-ball match.

The defeat itself was less significant than the circumstances surrounding it. Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) had tried but failed to secure international oppositions after being turned down by neighbouring countries. In the end, the only available solution was a makeshift three-team event, featuring two women's squads and a men's youth team.

The Tigresses have not featured in an international fixture since April, and the shortcomings of such an appalling preparatory arrangement quickly became apparent, further exposing the national team's "inconsistent" batting.

At the BKSP-3 Ground, Red Team folded for just 94 runs after reaching 50 without loss in pursuit of 182, while the boys – assembled barely a fortnight ago – looked sharper and hungrier despite their sheer lack of match experience; and that too in front of a decent crowd, media presence and a live telecast.

"After forming this U-15 team, we had

only two weeks of camp, and most of the boys had only played red-ball cricket before," said the winning team's pace bowling coach Mahbubul Alam Robin.

For Joty, the match offered perspective rather than despair. "We weren't getting matches for preparation, so it's better to face different opponents than to just play intra-squad games," she said.

Beyond results, however, deeper concerns lie in the conditions and resources available. Matches in Savar are being staged on slow, low pitches – ones that bear little resemblance to what awaits in India and Sri Lanka.

"If you compare these wickets with the World Cup tracks, the difference is huge. The wicket was slightly better [than the first fixture] because the sun came out, but still not ideal for preparation," said one

experienced player.

The lack of pace bowling options adds another layer to the challenge. "Apart from Marufa [Akter] and Trishna [Fariha], we don't really have pacers. You can't take rookies to a World Cup, but you need a proper pace attack to back up the spinners. There's no pipeline for pacers in the women's game, and our batting is inconsistent too," admitted another cricketer, also requesting anonymity.

Despite the concerns voiced by players, the selectors remain unfazed. "In the subcontinent, most teams don't play with more than two pacers," said women's chief selector Sazzad Ahmed Shipon.

For Bangladesh, the scoreline in Savar mattered less than what it revealed: a team heading into a global tournament after seemingly being set up to fail.

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AHF Cup. Hassan, however, denied the accusation.

"I also heard the allegation, but the fact is that there was no such official allegation in the manager's report. If there are any such allegations, then we must investigate the incident. And we never called those players to the camp, but we called all those players in the camp," said Hassan, adding that the players who were dropped would have the opportunity to join the preparation camp in future.

Head coach Moshirul Rahman Biplob said, "What we wanted from them in the preparation camp, they could not deliver, and the players have been picked up on the basis of performance and some other things."

Reazul Karim Babu has been named captain, with Ashraful Islam as his deputy.

"The squad is a mixture of senior and junior players. Senior players are experienced, but the junior players are ahead of the seniors in terms of fitness."

"If we can provide the right guidelines to the junior players and follow the instructions of the coach, then we expect something good," said Babu, hoping that they can qualify for the World Cup if they perform as per their strength despite the lack of preparation.



Fluminense goalkeeper Fabio overtook Englishman Peter Shilton's longstanding record for the most competitive appearances in men's football, playing his 1,391st match during his side's 2-0 victory over America de Cali on Tuesday. After the game which confirmed Fluminense's qualification to the quarterfinals of the Copa Sudamericana at the Maracana in Rio de Janeiro, the 44-year-old was honoured with a plate and a commemorative painting during a ceremony also attended by his family.

## 'No bias': BHF defends Asia Cup squad selection

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) dismissed allegations of bias in the selection of the national team for the upcoming Men's Hockey Asia Cup, beginning August 29 in Bihar, India.

The BHF yesterday finalised an 18-member squad with two standbys, leaving out most recent captain Pushkar Khisha Mimo, seasoned campaigner Moinul Islam Koushik, along with Naseem Uddin and Abed Uddin – all of whom featured in April's AHF Cup in Indonesia.

The dropped players, who had been staying at the BHF dormitory, reportedly confronted general secretary Riazul Hassan after the announcement and engaged in a heated exchange with a joint secretary.

"Both spoke loudly but it was amicable and later it was settled down because they [players] understood it," BHF general secretary Riazul Hassan told the reporters yesterday.

"If anyone thought that there has been bias in the selection, then it was a wrong idea because the members of the selection committee watched the training in the last 10 days – even I also watched the matches. The effort was to form the squad with the best available



**Squad:** Biplob Kujur, Nuruzzman Nayan, Ashraful Islam, Rezaul Karim Babu, Fahad Ahmed Shitul, Sohanur Rahman Sabuj, Hojaija Hossain, Amirul Islam, Mehedi Hasan, Roman Sarkar, Fazle Hossain Rabbi, Al Nahian Shuvu, Tayeb Ali, Tanvir Rahman Siam, Rokibul Hasan, Obaidul Hossain Joy, Arshad Hossain and Mohammad Abdullah.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

players."

One of the excluded players claimed they had been punished for protesting against food and other issues during the

Cabrera finds 'positivity' despite player shortage

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh national team head coach Javier Cabrera remains confident about preparing his side for the two upcoming FIFA friendlies against hosts Nepal on September 6 and 9, despite 10 Bashundhara Kings players expected to join the national camp only next month.

Cabrera began training on August 15 with just 13 players after Kings declined to release their squad members, citing pre-season preparations and injury concerns. To fill the gap, the 40-year-old coach called up eight U-19 players, and he is pleased with how the camp is progressing.

"We have 13 senior players in camp, as some others are with the U-23 team, while Kings players stayed back. To complete the group, we brought in some U-19 players, and we are happy with the positivity so far," Cabrera told reporters before yesterday's training at the National Stadium.

"I think it is going to be effective. There is enough time to prepare. Kings players will hopefully join next month, and we will still have time to get ready for the Nepal matches."

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) is still hoping to have England-based Hamza Choudhury arrive directly in Nepal, but Canada-based Shamit Shome will miss the friendlies. Despite this, Cabrera remains optimistic about the young players stepping up.

"The more games we play, the more players will be ready for the future. We still have many senior players, but with U-23s coming in, some seniors will naturally get less time. Now the young ones have a chance to prove themselves as we play practice matches before traveling to Nepal for the two friendlies," Cabrera said.

The Spanish coach also admitted that he had spoken with Bashundhara Kings president Imrul Hasan, who is also BFF senior vice president and deputy chairman of the National Teams Committee, regarding domestic and international schedules. Cabrera emphasised he has "a lot of respect" for Imrul and does not want to get into any controversies over the issue of player availability.

## Dutch announce squad for Bangladesh T20Is

SPORTS REPORTER

Netherlands on Wednesday have named a 15-member squad for their three-match T20I series against Bangladesh, starting August 30 in Sylhet.

Led by skipper Scott Edwards, the squad includes seasoned opener Max O'Dowd, pacer Paul van Meekeren, the Klein brothers Ryan and Kyle, off-spinner Aryan Dutt, and leg spinner Shariz Ahmed.

The Dutch will arrive in Dhaka on August 26 before moving to Sylhet for a three-day training camp ahead of the opener.

**Netherlands squad:** Max O'Dowd, Vikramjit Singh, Anil Nadamanuru, Scott Edwards, Noah Coes, Saqib Zulfiqar, Ryan Klein, Kyle Klein, Aryan Dutt, Paul van Meekeren, Shariz Ahmed, Ben Fletcher, Daniel Doran, Tim Pringle, Fred Klaassen.



PHOTO: FLUMINENSE