

India begin title defence against UAE

AGENCIES

Defending champions India will open their Asia Cup 2025 campaign against hosts UAE today in Dubai, marking their first major tournament since the retirements of Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma after the 2024 World Cup triumph.

Led by Suryakumar Yadav, India enter the tournament as overwhelming favourites to retain their crown. With Shubman Gill recalled to bolster the batting alongside Abhishek Sharma and Tilak Varma – the world's top two T20 batters – their lineup is packed with power.

Jasprit Bumrah's return adds further weight, with the pace spearhead expected to be decisive both in the powerplay and at the death.

Sanju Samson is likely to miss out, with Shabnam Gill set to open alongside Abhishek. For UAE, the fixture is a chance to shine on the big stage despite recent struggles, having failed to win a match in a home tri-series against Pakistan and Afghanistan.

UAE have faced India only once in T20Is, suffering a nine-wicket defeat in the 2016 Asia Cup. They also lost all three ODIs against India, the most recent in the 2015 World Cup.

Since the last T20 World Cup, India boast a dominant 24-3 win-loss record in T20Is.



Captains of all eight participating teams, including Bangladesh skipper Litton Das, pose for a photograph during the Asia Cup 2025 trophy unveiling ceremony in Dubai yesterday. PHOTO: ACC

ASIA CUP 2025

Expectation of fierce cricket despite fatigue and friction

EKUSH TAPADER from Dubai

Some light-hearted chatter accompanied the Asia Cup 2025 trophy unveiling in Dubai on Tuesday. Yet, beneath the smiles, the players' expressions revealed a lingering concern: travel fatigue, which could be an additional hurdle in the 17th edition of the continental tournament.

"I feel very sleepy right now." Sri Lanka captain Charith Asalanka's candid admission, tinged with exhaustion, drew laughter from the captains of the other seven teams around him. Stiffing a yawn, he laughed too, while India's Suryakumar Yadav and Bangladesh's Litton Das smiled in sympathy.

Having landed in Dubai earlier that day, Asalanka went straight to the venue. His words carried a clear plea for rest: "We just played two consecutive days in Zimbabwe before flying straight here. We need two days of rest. Hopefully, the coach will allow that."

Asalanka's weary tone captured how the Asia Cup is squeezed into an already packed calendar.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan skipper Rashid Khan voiced his own frustration. Traveling 150 kilometers from Dubai to Abu Dhabi just hours after the ceremony to play Hong Kong in the opening match, he said, "was far from ideal."

Not every team, however, faces the same burden. Bangladesh and Pakistan can consider themselves fortunate. While most sides will shuttle between Dubai and Abu

Dhabi, these two will remain in one base. Bangladesh will play all their group-stage matches in Abu Dhabi, while Pakistan, stationed in Dubai, will play all theirs there.

Back in 2018, despite enduring the Dubai-Abu Dhabi commute, Bangladesh made it to the final in the 2018 edition. Compared to which, Litton and Co can count this as a

"There's no sense of urgency. We've played very good cricket in the recent past and had quite a long camp. I think we're well prepared for the Asia Cup. All the teams are strong, and it will be challenging, but we're eager to take that challenge and give our hundred percent."

Bangladesh captain Litton Das

bleeding – especially having arrived in the UAE on the back of some positive results as well.

Litton, who scored a century in that 2018 final against India but walked away heartbroken, spoke with determination this time: "We still haven't tasted a championship – but that's history, and history is meant to be broken."

Afghanistan's challenge looks tougher. Although all three of their group games are in Abu Dhabi, the team is based in Dubai, meaning a 300 kilometer round trip each time. Rashid summed it up: "You'll have to travel back and forth for three games. It's unusual, but as a professional cricketer, you have to accept it."

Of the eight teams, only Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Oman are based in Abu Dhabi. Even then, Sri Lanka and Oman must travel to Dubai for one group game each.

As in many editions, the Asia Cup is shaped by its most anticipated fixture: India versus Pakistan. The rivalry, further inflamed by recent conflict in Pahalgam, remains a platform for drawing fans' attention while generating substantial revenue.

That tension also echoed in the captains' words.

India's Suryakumar was emphatic: "Whenever we step onto the field, we always carry an aggressive mindset. Without aggression, you can't play cricket. I'm raring to go from tomorrow [Wednesday]."

Pakistan captain Salman Agha struck a similar note: "Each player has a different mindset. Some are naturally aggressive. You can't stop them. If someone shows aggression on the field, we'll welcome it. From my side, there will be no restrictions."

As the Asia Cup 2025 begins, the hope is that the on-field battles overshadow off-field concerns, delivering a tournament rich with exciting cricket while overcoming visible fatigue and political tension.

'Fear gripped' booters stranded in Nepal

SPORTS REPORTER

With smoke rising from fires near the Crown Imperial Hotel in Kathmandu, and protesters frequently flocking to the hotel in search of political leaders, each footballer of the Bangladesh national football team spent anxious moments at the hotel yesterday.

The men in red and green are eagerly counting every minute to return home from Nepal, which has turned into a battlefield following Gen Z protests against corruption and the government's social media ban.

The unrest also saw Nepal Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli step down, as protesters set fire to the parliament building, a luxury hotel in Naxal, and many houses of parliamentary members and ministers.

The chaos forced Bangladesh to cancel Monday's scheduled training, and the All Nepal Football Federation suspended Tuesday's second



and final FIFA friendly match between Bangladesh and Nepal. The team had planned to fly home yesterday afternoon, but a lack of security en route to the airport forced them to remain at the hotel, with no confirmed return time.

"The fear gripped all of us at the hotel when we saw dark smoke rising from what was probably a political leader's house nearby," national forward Suman Reza told The Daily Star over phone.

"We were also anxious because of a gas pipeline beside the fire. We all came down to the lobby to be ready to evacuate if needed."

The players became even more nervous after watching a video of the Hilton Hotel being set on fire.

"While waiting in the lobby, protesters entered the hotel searching for political figures and threw stones. With no police or army around, the hotel staff told them only Bangladeshi and Nepalese footballers were staying here. The protesters calmed down and left," Suman said.

"The situation in Nepal is not good. Protesters are vandalising, setting fires, and looting – it reminds us of what happened in Bangladesh on August 5 last year," he added, assuring his family they were safe.

"Now we are more or less safe, but we don't know exactly when we can return home. The federation and embassy are monitoring the situation closely," Suman further said, as the Bangladesh Football Federation strive to make arrangements to bring back the booters safely.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's interim government issued clear directives for citizens stranded in Nepal. According to a post on the Chief Adviser's Facebook page, all Bangladeshis in Nepal are strongly advised to stay at their hotels or residences and not move outside, further informing that in addition to the 36-member football squad, a 51-member delegation from the Defence Services Command and Staff College, Mirpur, also remains in Kathmandu.

Under-23s notch first AFC win in six years

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh U-23 football team recorded their first victory in the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qualifiers in six years, breaking a seven-match losing streak with an emphatic 4-1 win over Singapore in their final Group C encounter in Vietnam yesterday.

Since their 2-0 victory against Sri Lanka in the last group stage of the same competition in 2019, Bangladesh had endured five consecutive defeats across the 2021 and 2023 editions. They then suffered two more losses in the ongoing tournament, to hosts Vietnam and Yemen.

Hoping to progress from the group stage, the men in red and green ultimately had to settle for a consolation win – but it was a well-deserved one. Captain Sheikh Morsalin delivered a standout performance, scoring once and providing three assists, all in the second half after a goalless opening period.

"We were carrying a lot of pain after losing the first two matches. Now we've been able to let that



go with this win," Morsalin said in a video message shared by the Bangladesh Football Federation.

"I also want to apologise to the spectators because we came here with high hopes. However,

we dedicate this win to our passionate supporters, and we aim to maintain this winning momentum in the days to come," added the Abahani midfielder. Morsalin expressed optimism

that Bangladesh would one day qualify for the U-23 Asian Cup finals.

Despite his central role in the victory, Morsalin credited the entire squad for the result.

"All credit goes to my teammates. This would not have been possible without their support. Everyone gave their maximum effort – it was a true team performance," he said.

Stand-in coach Hasan Al Mamun noted the team's improvement throughout the tournament and expressed hope that this group could produce players for the senior national team.

"There was clear progress throughout the qualifiers. We deserved to win against Yemen but, unfortunately, we couldn't get the result. Today, however, was a different story – the substitutions made a real impact," said Al Mamun.

He added that this pool of players has the potential to contribute significantly to the senior national side in the future.



ITALY REVIVE WORLD CUP HOPES

Florentina striker Moise Kean (R) celebrates one of his two goals as Italy prevailed in a whirlwind game to beat Israel 5-4 in their World Cup qualifier in Hungary on Monday. The Italians scored two own goals, twice came from behind and conceded a late equaliser but scrambled a win to stay in the hunt in Group I. The victory puts them to second in the group on nine points, ahead of Israel on goal difference with a game in hand, but three points off Norway who have also played four matches. PHOTO: REUTERS