

Hong Kong fan's playful wish comes true

ANISUR RAHMAN

Football fans wear their hearts on their sleeves, but at Dhaka's National Stadium yesterday, Hong Kong, China's travelling supporters added a refreshing twist. Around 110 fans journeyed from Hong Kong, China, not only waving their own emblems but also incorporating a touch of Bangladesh into their banners and scarves. The placards bore both the Chinese dragon and the Royal Bengal Tiger, symbolising goodwill and sporting respect ahead of the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers fixture.

Arriving on Tuesday, the Hong Kong FA-supported group transformed a corner behind the dugouts into a lively patch of Hong Kong. "We made the scarves ourselves, not for sale -- a gesture of friendship," said one fan, with George Tan adding it was their first away-game street march.

Before kick-off, one female supporter cheekily predicted a Hong Kong win, while another grinned: "We want Bangladesh to score one, and Hong Kong two." The first hour delivered that wish, with Hamza Choudhury giving the hosts a breakthrough before Hong Kong pulled one back at the stroke of half-time before taking the lead in the 50th minute, leaving the score level at 2-1 in favour of the visitors.

More drama unfolded in the remaining minutes, as both sides netted two more goals each, but eventually, the Hong Kong



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

fan's wish of a narrow win came true. Earlier, as the gates opened at 3:00pm, local fans poured in, families in red and green eager to see Hamza and company in action. Madrasa student Sifat Ullah was

"hoping for a good result," while Tofael Ahmed brought his young daughter to share the football fever which evoked nostalgia in him.

While the home crowd brought

warmth and family spirit, the Hong Kong supporters stood out for their passion and goodwill -- proof that football, at its best, is a celebration of connection as much as competition.



Avishek powers Khulna into final

SPORTS REPORTER

All-rounder Avishek Das Aronno's quickfire knock powered Khulna Division to the final of the National Cricket League (NCL) T20 after they beat Chattogram Division by four wickets in DLS method in the first qualifier at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium on Thursday.

The former Under-19 World Cup winner, who returned to competitive cricket through NCL T20 after a long injury layoff, struck an unbeaten 27 off 11 balls with three fours and two sixes and shared an unbroken 51-run stand with Nahidul Islam (21 not out off nine balls) to guide their side to 81-6 in 8.3 overs in the rain-marred encounter.

Earlier, chasing 149, Khulna reached 3-1 in 2.1 overs when rain interrupted the contest. Later, they were given a revised target of 78 runs in nine overs.



Chattogram's Ahmed Sharif and Hasan Murad then took two wickets each to reduce Khulna to 30 for six in 5.1 overs before the late surge from Avishek and Nahidul powered their side home with three balls to spare.

Earlier, skipper Yasir Ali struck an unbeaten 45 off 37 balls while Irfan Shukkur contributed 39 runs as Chattogram posted 148-6 in 20 overs after they were sent into bat.

The defeated Chattogram will now take on reigning champions Rangpur Division in the second qualifier on Friday at the same venue.

Rangpur, earlier on the day, beat Dhaka Division by one wicket in a thrilling eliminator at the same venue to knock out Dhaka.

Chasing 124, skipper Akbar Ali's 44 off 27 took Rangpur close to the finish line. But after he was out in the second ball of the final over, No.11 batter Gaffar Saqlain hit the winning four to take them home in 19.5 overs.

SHORT CORNER

'Mental fatigue the real test'

Shubman Gill said Thursday that his biggest opponent could be "mental fatigue" after the India Test captain recently took over charge of the 50-over side. Speaking ahead of Friday's second Test against the West Indies in New Delhi, Gill conceded that it was a challenge to play all three international formats, but that was what drove him.

WI name squads for Bangladesh tour

The West Indies have announced their squads for this month's white-ball tour of Bangladesh. Shai Hope is named captain of both squads, with the likes of Gudakesh Motie, Sherfane Rutherford, Jayden Seales, Romario Shepherd and Brandon King also included in both formats. There is a maiden ODI call-up for former West Indies Under-19 captain Akeem Auguste, with experienced top-order batter Evin Lewis to skip the tour as he continues his recovery from a wrist injury.

Mbappe relaxed and ready for WC qualifiers

France captain Kylian Mbappe said Thursday he was feeling relaxed with his life in Madrid and was in good shape as his nation seeks to move to the brink of World Cup qualification as they face Azerbaijan in Paris. Mbappe had received treatment for a "small niggle" in his right ankle picked up playing for Real Madrid last weekend.

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Marufa 'doing well' as Tigresses target Kiwis

SPORTS REPORTER

Undeterred by the defeat to England from a commanding position, Bangladesh are turning their focus to today's ICC Women's World Cup clash against New Zealand in Guwahati, boosted by confidence from their fight against a vastly superior opponents following a win over Pakistan.

Bowling has been their primary strength, and pacer Marufa Akter, who suffered cramps in the last match, is expected to recover fully. Spinner Nahida Akter informed in yesterday's pre-match press conference that Marufa "is doing well" and the team hope she is "ready" for their third contest in the eight-team tournament.

It is the batting department where improvements could really produce dividends. Rubya Haider Jhelik and Sobhana Mostary provided solid starts, while Rabeya Khan was the latest to



impress with a fiery knock in the lower order. Skipper Nigar Sultana Joyt, along with Shorna Akter and Sharmin Akter

have misfired, but Nahida opined the batters have "maybe collapsed a bit in a few areas".

The England loss, sealed after Heather Knight was reprieved by inconclusive TV replays, is behind them. "What happened is already in the past," Nahida said, adding that the Tigresses feel secure in the plans they made.

"Every World Cup match is challenging. Nothing comes easy. We are preparing with that mindset. I feel if we play a little better than we did in the last game, we can do something significant."

The Kiwis, on the other hand, despite losing their opening matches, feature in-form Sophie Devine -- who followed up a 112 against Australia with an 85 against South Africa -- and the explosive Suzie Bates. All-rounder Amelia Kerr acknowledged Bangladesh's bowling attack is capable of troubling teams.

"I think, apart from the opening bowler [Marufa], they're a spin-heavy attack, and they've had a lot of teams in trouble as well throughout this tournament we've seen," Kerr said.

Mohamed Salah underpinned his value to Egypt with two sublime goals in their 3-0 win over Djibouti on Wednesday as they qualified for the World Cup. It means an opportunity for the 33-year-old Salah to play at a second World Cup for a team who have not won a trophy during his 14-year international career. At the 2018 World Cup in Russia, he scored both Egypt's goals, but they lost all three group matches. Salah also missed a decisive penalty against Senegal in the 2022 qualifiers for Qatar.

PHOTO: FACEBOOK



The inflation of Bangladesh's run drought

ASHAQ-UL-ALAM

If there ever was an award in cricket for stating the obvious after a defeat, Bangladesh ODI captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz would be up for it for the reasoning he provided following the loss against Afghanistan in Abu Dhabi on Wednesday.

"We lost 40 runs on this wicket... if we could get 260 plus, it would definitely be better," said Miraz at the post-match ceremony, explaining why his side suffered a five-wicket defeat.

To be fair to Miraz, ruing not scoring enough runs is a tried and tested excuse for Bangladesh captains as many of his predecessors have used it numerous times. The only difference is the number of runs.

Earlier, that figure used to hover around the 15-20 runs mark, but now it has jumped to 40, an inflation that could be likened to the recent surge of gold prices in the country.

However obvious his reasoning was, it wasn't off the mark. Batting first, the Tigers could not put up a

decent total, getting rolled over for a mere 221 in 48.5 overs.

The bowling attack did well to make the match somewhat competitive but overall, Bangladesh was the second best team on the field throughout the game.

It was Bangladesh's ninth defeat in their last 10 ODIs, a clear indication of how far the Tigers have fallen in their once preferred format. And the bulk of the blame for this downfall lies on the batting department.

In the six ODIs Miraz and Co. have played this year so far, they have batted out their 50 overs only once, against New Zealand in Rawalpindi in the ICC Champions Trophy, and even in that game they had lost nine wickets.

They have been bowled out in their last four ODIs and they were similarly bundled out for four straight matches in 2022-2023.

Prior to that, the last time they had been all-out in four or more ODIs on the trot was back in 2008 -- twice against Pakistan and thrice against Australia, all away fixtures. The batters who the team



depended on 2024, have lost their rhythm. Skipper Miraz, who averaged 38.12 in eight innings last year, averages 19.16 in six outing this year.

Former captain Najmul Hossain Shanto's average has fallen from 75.15 to a mere 19.33 while opener Tanzid Hasan Tamim's average has gone down from 33.42 to 24.16.

Jaker Ali, who averaged 50.33 at a brisk strike rate of 111.85, has had his average knocked down to 37.50 while his strike rate has tumbled to 69.44.

Amidst all the slumps, Tawhid Hridoy's average has improved, going up from 30 to 44.33, but his slow scoring rate of 70.37 has stagnated the innings in the middle overs.

The top-order is not setting a solid base in most games, the middle-order is providing some runs but at a snail's pace and the lower order is not sticking around long enough to make a difference, leaving the tail-enders to fend for themselves in the death overs.

The poor form of batters is concerning, but the dearth of options to replace them is more alarming.

The management brought in the in-form Saif Hassan for the first ODI as a probable solution and he made 26 on debut. But when a side is betting on the form of a debutant to turn their fortunes, it can't be a surprise that after the game, their captain would rue not having enough runs.