

'Ready to dominate South Asia'

Bangladesh had to settle for a draw against hosts Hong Kong in their Asian Cup Qualifying away match, but it was not enough to keep their qualification chances alive. During a stopover in Thailand on the way home, stand-in captain and defender Topu Barman spoke to *The Daily Star's* Anisur Rahman about the team's recent journey, their upcoming matches, and more. The excerpts are as follows:



The Daily Star (DS): How do you evaluate the team's performance against Hong Kong?

Topu Barman (TB): We are proud of the way we dominated them in such an electrifying atmosphere in front of a full-house crowd [at Kai Tak Stadium], especially as many of the new players were not used to performing in that kind of situation. Hong Kong could hardly create any goalscoring opportunities except for the penalty, as we successfully stopped their wing play -- the same style that hurt us in Dhaka.

DS: How much pressure did you feel performing in front of some 50,000 spectators?

TB: The day before the match, we discussed what the stadium atmosphere might be like, and we reminded ourselves to enjoy the situation rather than feel pressured. However, it was difficult to pass on instructions to teammates because of the loud cheers from Hong Kong fans.

DS: How do you explain conceding the penalty while trying to build up from deep?

TB: Actually, we have been playing a build-up style for nearly three years under Javier Cabrera. I think it was just a one-off incident for Tariq [Kazi] yesterday.

DS: How do you feel now that Bangladesh are out of the Asian Cup race after the fourth-matchday results?

TB: Personally, I'm not happy with the overall results because, as a team, we expected better.

DS: What explains the difference between your home and away results, since Bangladesh lost both home matches but drew both away?

TB: It's really tough to explain. If you look back at all four matches, we were in a better position in almost every aspect... [but] lacked concentration at key moments in the home matches and were punished. In away games, we were more focused and gave more than our ability.

DS: The inclusion of foreign groomed players like Hamza Choudhury and Shमित Shome has raised expectations, but the team still can't seem to get the wins. Why do you think that is?

TB: No doubt, our standard has improved with the inclusion of Hamza and Shमित -- they're high-quality players and outstanding human beings. But results are what matter the most. This time, expectations were higher than ever... I believe we're now capable of dominating any South Asian opponent.

Small comforts and a wasted chance

SPORTS REPORTER

Following Bangladesh's 1-1 draw against Hong Kong in a crucial away fixture of the Asian Cup Qualifiers on Tuesday, both coach Javier Cabrera and goalscorer Rakib Hossain rued the fact that they failed to get at least four points from the two matches against Hong Kong, which would have still kept them in the hunt for qualification.

However, the players and the team management's body language throughout this campaign, which has fallen way short of expectation, says otherwise regarding their desire and desperation.

The men in red and green entered the packed Kai Tak Stadium knowing full well that anything less than victory could all but end their Asian Cup dreams. Yet, despite the high stakes, they found themselves trailing until the 84th minute, when Rakib's late strike salvaged a point against the 10-man hosts.

Rakib's goal triggered wild celebrations -- he leapt onto the advertising boards, with teammates piling in as if Bangladesh had sealed a famous win. The harsh reality, however, was that the draw did little to alter their precarious position; elimination still loomed large, and precious minutes ticked away.

Instead of pushing urgently for a campaign-saving winner, Bangladesh

slipped back into their habitual slow, cautious build-up play, showing little urgency or belief. It appeared that the players were content -- perhaps even proud -- to have snatched a point away from home against a higher-ranked side.



But that sense of satisfaction only underlined a deeper problem: a small-minded comfort in mediocrity. It was as though the team had learned nothing from their previous encounter against the same opponent in Dhaka, where a euphoric celebration after Shमित Shome's 99th-minute equaliser -- joined enthusiastically by coach Javier Cabrera and his entire bench -- was followed almost immediately by Hong Kong's 101st-minute winner.

After that home defeat, veteran

centre-back Topu Barman had lamented that Bangladesh should have slowed the game to preserve the draw. Ironically, in Hong Kong, the team seemed to take that advice too literally -- showing little urgency and playing as if a draw was a result worth protecting rather than overcoming.

Adding to the controversy, defender Saad Uddin -- heavily criticised over his performances -- took to social media after the match to post about his importance to the national team. The timing and tone of the post only reinforced the perception of misplaced priorities and fragile egos within the squad.

These incidents speak volumes about a mentality problem -- one not limited to the players, but shared by the management as well. There appears to be an ingrained culture of taking comfort in minimal progress, of celebrating the smallest of achievements while losing sight of the bigger picture.

And that bigger picture could not have been clearer. Bangladesh were handed a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reach the Asian Cup finals for the first time since 1980. Drawn in Group C alongside India, Hong Kong and Singapore -- in an expanded 24-team tournament -- Cabrera and his players had every reason to believe qualification was within reach.

Even the head coach himself had fuelled optimism before the campaign, repeatedly claiming that all four teams were closely matched and that Bangladesh had a realistic chance of topping the group. On paper, he was not wrong. India, the group's top seeds and five-time Asian Cup winners, entered the qualifiers low on confidence, while Hong Kong and Singapore were hardly invincible. Bangladesh and Singapore had each appeared only once in the Asian Cup -- in 1980 and 1984 respectively -- while Hong Kong had never qualified.

Yet when the time came for boldness, Cabrera chose caution. His starting XI on Tuesday featured three centre-backs and two wing-backs -- a defensive setup hardly suited to a must-win match. This was typical Cabrera football: contain the opposition for two-thirds of the game, then send on young, energetic legs to chase a late goal. It worked partially this time -- Rakib's equaliser was the fruit of that late burst -- but more often than not, this conservative playbook has come up short.

In the end, Bangladesh's campaign was undone not merely by technical limitations, but by a mindset content with "good enough." Cabrera's defensive philosophy and the players' muted ambition combined to waste a golden opportunity -- one that may not come again soon.

CAPTAIN MIRAZ under scanner

SPORTS REPORTER

In the past 12 months, Bangladesh have twice experienced a complete reversal in T20I and ODI fortunes in the same tour -- first against West Indies in the Caribbean in December last year, and then against Afghanistan in the recently concluded series in the UAE.

In both tours, the Tigers won the T20I series 3-0 but got thrashed in the 50-over format by the same margin.

The 3-0 drubbing against the Afghans, especially the 200-run defeat in the dead rubber third match, was surprising, considering majority of the players who starred in the T20I triumph were present in the ODI setup too.

The only notable change in the two squads was the name of the captain: in T20Is it was the stand-in skipper Jaker Ali, while in the ODIs it was Mehidy Hasan Miraz.

Miraz had also led the side against West Indies as a stand-in skipper after regular captain Najmul Hossain Shanto fell injured.

In the Caribbean, the Tigers failed miserably under Miraz in ODIs but in the following T20I series, triumphed with Litton Das as captain.

Miraz would get the ODI captaincy on an official basis ahead of the Sri Lanka tour in June, where the Tigers won the T20I series 2-1 but their ODI form and application was dismal, leading to a 2-1 series loss.

The series defeat to Afghanistan means Miraz has lost three ODI series on the trot as captain, at a time when the team has done reasonably well in T20Is.

Former national captain Khaled Mahmud Sujon pointed out instances where Miraz fell short as an on-field tactician against Afghanistan and also criticised the ODI side for its lack of resourcefulness.

"We are not even scoring 250 now and don't think they have crossed 200 this series. In modern cricket you need to keep on innovating," Mahmud said.

"I don't think they played to win. When Bangladesh got back into the match with the ball [in third ODI], knowing that [Mohammad] Nabi is weaker against pace, Hasan [Mahmud] should have been brought on earlier. Even though Hasan went for runs, he has good yorkers.

"It was difficult to play Saif [Hassan] in that wicket. Even though he is a part-timer, he did get Bangladesh back into the game. He could have used him for two-three more overs. Miraz should have shown that confidence. I didn't like that," he added.

Miraz has been a key player against Afghanistan over the years for his ability to play their spinners. In the recent series, however, he made just 70 runs in three outings, and it contributed to the batting order crumbling like a house of cards.

Many believe that how the captaincy changed hands from Shanto to Miraz in June created the platform for the current climate in the ODI side.

But Mahmud argued, "I don't think you can excuse away the results because of how the captaincy was changed. Definitely how it [captaincy change] happened confused the team and sent a wrong message to the players that anyone can take the captain's role at any time. Captaincy is not a musical chair."



West Indies players arrived in Dhaka yesterday and were welcomed at a city hotel ahead of their white-ball series against Bangladesh. The two sides will first face off in three ODIs at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur on October 18, 21, and 23, before moving to Chattogram for the three T20Is on October 27, 29, and 31. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



Pakistan players celebrate after the dismissal of South Africa's Dewald Brevis (L) during the fourth day of the first Test at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore yesterday. Left-arm spinner Noman Ali Khan starred with the ball, taking 10 wickets in the match as Pakistan won by 93 runs. PHOTO: AFP



South Africa players celebrate Evidence Makgopa's goal during a 3-0 victory against Rwanda on Tuesday, a victory that sealed the Bafana Bafana a berth in the 2026 FIFA World Cup. South Africa topped Group C with 18 points to seal their fourth appearance at the global showpiece. Ivory Coast and Senegal, too, booked their World Cup tickets on the night. PHOTO: FACEBOOK



Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo became the all-time leading goalscorer in World Cup qualifying history at age 40, scoring twice against Hungary on Tuesday. Ronaldo's 40th and 41st qualifying goals, both in the first-half, put Portugal 2-1 ahead and saw him surpass retired Guatemala forward Carlos Ruiz, who had 39 between 1998 and 2016. However, Portugal were forced to postpone sealing their World Cup spot after Dominik Szoboszlai netted a stoppage-time equaliser in a 2-2 home draw.

Tigresses unfazed by champions' aura

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will look to draw on their spirited displays from earlier matches as they aim to upset defending champions Australia in their fifth game of the ICC Women's World Cup in Vizag today.

After opening their campaign with a seven-wicket win over Pakistan, the Tigresses have suffered three straight defeats but earned plaudits for their fight and competitiveness against top-ranked sides.

Against both England and South Africa, Bangladesh created significant opportunities -- reducing their opponents to 103-6 and 78-5 respectively while defending totals of 178 and 232 -- but failed to capitalise due to dropped catches and inconsistent bowling, eventually suffering narrow and heartbreaking defeats.

While the batting unit remains a concern, inconsistency in the middle overs has also exposed weaknesses in the bowling attack, allowing opponents to recover after early pressure.

Nevertheless, batter Sobhana Mostary said the team remains focused on positivity and improvement ahead of their biggest challenge yet.

"After yesterday's [Tuesday's] match, we didn't talk about any negative things. Everyone discussed the positives. I think that positive discussion will help us in our next games," Mostary told reporters on the eve of the match yesterday.

"Australia are the world champions, and we always have the expectation of playing well against them. We go to the field to fight and to win matches," she added.

Australia, meanwhile, have been one of the tournament's most consistent teams, securing wins over New Zealand, Pakistan and India, while their match against Sri Lanka abandoned due to rain.

Although the seven-time champions have beaten Bangladesh in all four previous WODIs, Australian all-rounder Annabel Sutherland said they would not take the oppositions lightly.

"No, we don't take anyone lightly. I think we've prepared really well. We've got good training tonight ahead of tomorrow, and everyone's ready to go," Sutherland said.

"We had a really good series against them a little over a year ago, which gave us some great insights. It's a pretty similar team they've got here, so we've studied them thoroughly and know what to expect," she added.