

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is again relying on domestic tournaments and a short preparation camp instead of international fixtures to prepare the women's team for the upcoming ICC Women's T20 World Cup Qualifiers – repeating the approach taken before this year's Women's World Cup in India, which it later admitted was a mistake.

Before the 50-over World Cup, Bangladesh went nearly five months without international cricket, a gap that seemingly contributed to narrow defeats against Sri Lanka, England, and South Africa.

Although the BCB, players, and coaching staff had publicly cited this as a key shortcoming, the team is in the same situation heading into the qualifiers event, scheduled in Nepal from January 18 to February 1.

Since returning from the World Cup in October – where Bangladesh won only one match and finished second from bottom – the players have featured in one T20 domestic competition, the eight-team T20 competition Women's National Cricket League in November.

However, several national stars, including captain Nigar Sultana Joty, Marufa Akter, and Nahida Akter, skipped the competition due to various reasons.

The cricketers will next take part in the four-team Women's Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL), set to be held in Rajshahi from December 15 to 25, also



in T20 format.

Bangladesh were initially slated to tour India during this window for three WODIs and three WT20Is, but after the hosts postponed the series indefinitely, the BCB did not set up any alternative international engagement.

Women's team's chief selector Sazzad Ahmed Shipon said the board is planning a week-long training camp – either in Dhaka or outside the capital – to finalise preparations before the team departs for Nepal on January 12.

"There is less than three weeks [after BCL and before the team's departure]. If any series is played, things get tight.

That's why we are playing the BCL in T20 format [last edition was held in the three-day format] so that the players get used to the format," Shipon told The Daily Star on Friday.

According to the qualifiers' fixture, Bangladesh, placed in Group A, will open their campaign in the 10-team tournament against the USA on January 18, followed by matches against Papua New Guinea, Namibia and Ireland on January 20, 22 and 24 respectively.

The top three teams from Group A and B will advance to the Super Six stage, and the top four teams will qualify for the Women's T20 World Cup, set to be held

in England from June 12 to July 5 -- the largest edition yet, featuring 12 teams.

A probable reason behind the board's seemingly casual approach regarding the team's preparation is that Bangladesh have regularly featured in the event since 2014 and have consistently qualified through the qualifiers. Still, given the nature of the shortest format, heading into the qualifiers undercooked is a risky proposition.

Moreover, if the Tigresses qualify for the mega event, they will most likely head into it underprepared, with only one FTP-sanctioned home series – three WODIs and three T20Is against Sri Lanka in April – scheduled before the World Cup.

The players are supposed to take part in two domestic tournaments before the Sri Lanka series – the proposed three or four-team Women's Bangladesh Premier League (WBPL) in February, announced by BCB president Aminul Islam Bulbul, and the 50-over Women's Dhaka Premier League (WDPL) starting in March.

However, the feasibility of hosting the Women's BPL in February remains unclear with the national elections on February 12 and Ramadan approaching soon after.

"The team will return on February 2 from Nepal. After that, two tournaments are supposed to happen... I don't think it's viable to arrange another series after that. The time is very short," Shipon said, adding that the board can't hold the Women's DPL in the 20-over format as it can't impose that decision on the clubs.

UNDER-19S ASIA CUP

Junior Tigers begin title defence against Afghanistan

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh are set to begin the defence of their Under-19s Asia Cup title in their Group B fixture against Afghanistan at ICC Academy Ground A in the UAE today.

The junior Tigers have lifted the trophy in the past two editions, but head coach Naveed Nawaz instructed his players to focus on playing as a team and enjoying the matches to avoid pressure.

"We were discussing the processes we have put in place. The main thing is to enjoy everything during the Asia Cup and work together as a team. Make sure no one is left alone, enjoy each other's success, and when pressure comes, we should be able to come on top," Naveed said on Tuesday, a day before the team's departure from the country.

Bangladesh have been placed in Group B alongside Afghanistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The U-19 Asia Cup began on Friday with both India and Pakistan registering big margin wins against UAE and Malaysia, respectively.

India opener Vaibhav Suryavanshi lit up the tournament with a 95-ball 171 as India posted a mammoth 433 for six in 50 overs. UAE were restricted to 199 for seven as India claimed a 234 run win. Pakistan started with a 297-run victory over Malaysia after Sameer Minhas' 148-ball 177 and Ahmed Hussain's 132.

SPORTS REPORTER

The domestic arena of Bangladesh cricket has long been mired in controversies and irregularities, despite repeated calls from experts and the media to strengthen its core in order to improve the country's cricketing structure. That crisis appears to have deepened this season, with four of the five opening day fixtures tomorrow expected to result in walkovers as several clubs could skip the games in protest against alleged irregularities in the most recent Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) elections.

The Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) announced the fixtures on Thursday, listing all 20 participating clubs, even though some teams have shown no intention of turning up, with eight teams skipping last month's players' transfer window. Only the opening day match between Bangladesh Police Cricket Club and Old DOHS Sports Club is expected to begin as scheduled at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur.

Relegated Premier League clubs usually play promoted First Division teams in the opening fixtures. Interestingly, the Police-Old DOHS fixture does not fall under that format but was arranged nonetheless, with a CCDM official explaining the committee

OPENING DAY FIXTURES

Partex Sporting Club vs Baridhara Dazzlers (PKSP-2)

Gazi Tyres Cricket Academy vs Dhaka United (BKSP-3)

Amber Sporting Club vs Kalabagan Krira Chakra (BKSP-4)

Bangladesh Police Cricket Club vs Old DOHS Sports Club (SBNCS)

Lalmatia Club vs Dhamondi Cricket Club (SCG)

wanted to schedule at least one match "which will take place."

Former Bangladesh captain Tamim Iqbal, a councillor of Old DOHS Sports Club, has allowed his team to participate, even though they were among the 45 clubs that had protested alleged irregularities in the BCB elections. The league had already been postponed several times before the latest dates and fixture list were finalised, and a CCDM official confirmed there would be no further delays.

"The league will start; there is no more opportunity to postpone," the official said. Any team failing to

show up will automatically concede a walkover, with the opposition receiving full points. "When the league ends, the teams which did not play will be relegated and no relegation league will be held," the official added, noting that fixtures were prepared with all 20 clubs so that no side would be excluded.

Partex Sporting Club, scheduled to face Baridhara Dazzlers on Sunday at PKSP, are not expected to take the field. The club's general secretary, Sajid Hossain, said they are "not going to play because the situation is muddy at the moment." Some sources suggested that certain clubs may also be waiting to see how the political landscape shifts ahead of the upcoming national elections.

Partex, however, initially showed interest in participating in the league. "We had no objection to playing the league, but the situation is not right. If all the teams don't participate, what's the use of playing? We have no objections regarding the BCB elections or other things," the official said. Partex also objected to beginning the season with the First Division, arguing that the season traditionally starts with the Third Division and then moves upward.

The fault lines that emerged during the last BCB elections continue to influence the game, leaving a domestic structure long in need of stability facing an even shakier start this year.

SHORT CORNER



Messi to unveil 21-metre statue of himself on India 'GOAT' tour

Lionel Messi will unveil a 21-metre (70-foot) statue of himself in India on Saturday as he embarks on a three-day tour of the country that has sparked a fan frenzy. The iron sculpture in Kolkata is part of a so-called GOAT tour that will take in four Indian cities and a possible meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

U-17s beat Sri Lanka to clinch one-day series

Left-arm pacer Atiqur Akash delivered a stellar performance as the Bangladesh under-17 team defeated Sri Lanka by five wickets in the third and final one-dayer, sealing a 2-1 series victory at the Bir Shrestha Shaheed Flight Lieutenant Matir Rahman Cricket Stadium in Chattogram on Friday.

Women's U-19 suffer series defeat to Pakistan

Bangladesh U-19 women's team suffered a 3-2 series defeat against their Pakistani counterparts after losing the fifth and final T20 by six wickets at the Cox's Bazar Academy Ground yesterday.

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Jacob Duffy led the way with a superb 5-38 as New Zealand cruised to a nine-wicket win over the West Indies in the second Test in Wellington on Friday, giving the hosts a 1-0 lead in the three-match series following a draw in the opener. Duffy, securing his second five-wicket haul in just his third Test -- also his second in consecutive matches -- helped skittle the visitors for 128 after lunch on Day 3. Despite missing several frontline quicks and losing Blair Tickner to a dislocated shoulder on the opening day, the makeshift Black Caps attack still ripped through the West Indies lineup to set up a modest chase of 56. Devon Conway (28*) and Kane Williamson (16*) guided New Zealand home before Tea, sealing the dominant victory.

PHOTO: AFP



Bashundhara Kings forward Rakib Hossain celebrates his 15th-minute strike against Mohammedan during their Bangladesh Football League fixture at the Kings Arena on Friday. Dorielton Gomes added a stoppage-time goal as the five-time champions won 2-0 to move five points clear at the top of the table, while defending champions Mohammedan remained in fourth, nine points adrift.

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