

From Messi mania to mayhem



The pull of eight-time Ballon d'Or winner Lionel Messi was meant to offer fans the satisfaction of at least a fleeting glimpse, but the frenzy surrounding his arrival in India spiralled into chaos instead. Messi touched down in Kolkata at around 2:26am on Saturday, beginning his three-day, four-city GOAT India Tour 2025. Despite the late hour, thousands gathered outside the airport and later near his hotel, creating a carnival-like atmosphere with chants, flags and phone lights as the Argentine great was escorted through heavy security. Hours later, Salt Lake Stadium was packed with fans hoping to see Messi, who briefly walked around the pitch waving before leaving within about 20 minutes amid mounting unrest. Frustration over tight security and mismanagement boiled over as spectators tore down banners, hurled water bottles and stormed the pitch, forcing authorities to remove Messi for safety. The chief organiser, Satadru Dutta, was detained, while West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee issued a public apology and ordered a probe. Earlier, Messi met Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan at a closed-door event. He will next visit Hyderabad, Mumbai and New Delhi, where a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled.

PHOTO: AFP/FACEBOOK



Junior Tigers seal opening win with record chase

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Under-19s pulled off a thrilling three-wicket victory over Afghanistan Under-19s on Saturday at the ICC Academy Ground in Dubai, chasing down the highest target ever successfully chased in ACC U-19 Asia Cup history. Riding on an exceptional 151-run opening stand between Zawad Abrar (96) and Rifat Beg (62), the two-time defending champions got off to a perfect start in their first Group B fixture, which also includes Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Afghanistan won the toss and elected to bat, posting a formidable 283 for 7 in their allotted 50 overs. The innings was anchored by Faisal Shinozada, who struck a fluent 103 off 94 balls with 8 fours and 4 sixes, helping the Afghan side build a competitive total. Useful contributions from Uzairullah Niazi (44) and a late flourish from Azizullah Miakhil (38 not out) and Abdul Aziz (26 not out) ensured Afghanistan finished with plenty for the bowlers to defend.



In reply, Bangladesh got off to a flying start. Openers Zawad and Rifat put on a commanding partnership of 151 runs for the first wicket, effectively taking the game away from the Afghan bowlers early. Abrar looked in complete control, scoring 96 before being dismissed just shy of a century, while Rifat supported well with 62, giving Bangladesh the platform they needed.

Once the opening stand was broken, captain Azizul Hakim Tamim joined the crease and guided his side through the nervy middle overs with a 48-ball 47. There was a late stutter, though, as Bangladesh lost a few wickets towards the end, but the Junior Tigers eventually scraped across the line.

In the other match of the day, Sri Lanka thrashed Nepal by eight wickets.



Award winners pose for a group photograph during the Max-BSPA Journalist Award 2024, organised by Bangladesh Sports Press Association, at a hotel in the capital yesterday. A total of 24 awards were given in eight categories among sports writers and photographers for their outstanding work in the field of sports journalism in 2024. Among the winners were The Daily Star's sub-editor Ashfaq-Ul-Alam and senior photographer Firoz Ahmed.

PHOTO: BSPPA

Abahani return to winning ways

SPORTS REPORTER

Reigning runners up Abahani returned to winning ways in the Bangladesh Football League with a commanding 5-0 victory over hosts Fakirerpool Young Men's Club in Manikganj on Saturday.

Malian forward Souleymane Diabate struck a brace, while Mirajul Islam, Sheikh Morsalin and Al Amin added one goal apiece as the Sky Blues registered their second league win. Abahani now sit fourth in the 10-team table with eight points from six matches.

Fakirerpool showed early resistance but fell behind in the 32nd minute when Diabate tapped in a square pass from Mohammad Ibrahim. The hosts had a chance to respond four minutes later, but Ivorian forward Ouattara Ben Ibrahim missed a penalty. Diabate doubled the lead in the 41st minute before Mirajul made it 3-0 just before the break.

Abahani maintained control after the interval, with Morsalin and Al Amin adding further goals to seal the 5-0 win.

In the day's other match, newcomers PWD held Bangladesh Police to a goalless draw. Police slipped to sixth place with seven points while PWD are eighth with six points.

Eleven-team Women's Football League from Dec 29

SPORTS REPORTER

The long-awaited Women's Football League will kick off on December 29 following the opening of a 13-day transfer window, with each of the 11 participating clubs allowed to register up to 35 players for the month-long competition.

The decision was finalised yesterday after a meeting between Mahfuza Akter Kiron, Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) Women's Wing chairman, and club representatives. Five teams will feature in the top-tier league for the first time, joining six returning sides.

"We are going to start the Women's Football League... as per the recommendations from the FIB [First Instant Body]," Kiron told The Daily Star after the meeting at the BFF House.

She added that the league will be played in a single-league format and conclude on January 31, allowing the national team to depart for their maiden AFC Women's Asian Cup campaign in early February.

The inclusion of 11 teams ensures each club plays at least 10 matches -- a key requirement for eligibility in the AFC Women's Champions League -- giving the league champions a pathway to continental competition.

Despite earlier suggestions of a pool system for top players, Kiron confirmed



TRANSFER WINDOW:

December 14-26

LEAGUE STARTS:

December 29

TEAMS: 11

Nasrin FA, Bangladesh Army SC, Suddopuskorini Jubo SC, Siraj Srity Sangsad, Farashganj SC, Dhaka Rangers FC, Jamalpur Kacharipara Ekadash, Ansar & VDP FC, Bangladesh Police FC, BKSP FC, Rajshahi Stars FC
TOTAL MATCHES: 55
VENUE: Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium, Kamalapur

there will be none. Clubs must field at least four age-group players in their starting eleven -- two each from U-17 and U-20 -- with substitutes also drawn from those groups to maximise match exposure and development.

The quota for foreign players has been increased to four from two -- featured in the last edition held in March-April last year -- although only three can feature in a single match.

While the league will be completed within a tight timeframe, fixtures have been arranged to ensure a minimum two-day rest between games.

On sponsorship, Kiron said Walton has, in principle, agreed to support the women's league with Tk 10 lakh, while the BFF is also considering providing participation fees to clubs after discussions with federation president Tabitha Awal.

There will be no national team training camp during the league, but the women's team coaching staff will closely monitor players and coordinate with club coaches to track form and fitness.

Looking ahead, Kiron said plans are in place to arrange two practice matches for the national team in early February en route to Australia, with discussions ongoing with Malaysia over possible friendlies. English coach Peter Butler, she added, will return in early January after a Christmas break.

CONFLICT LINGERS as First Division League starts

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

A starkly contrasting scene unfolded at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday, on the eve of the Dhaka First Division Cricket League 2025-26 curtain-raiser.

While representative cricketers from 12 confirmed clubs attended a trophy-unveiling photo session near the National Cricket Academy, as many as 50-60 players from eight absentee clubs and beyond staged a human-chain protest at Gate 2, citing Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) election rigging and other disputes which led to the conflict between the BCB and 44 Dhaka-based rebel clubs from various leagues.

It was a disheartening sight for players who rely on the league for both competition and livelihood. Zakaria Masud, who played last season for Amber Sporting Club, called it unprecedented.

"I have been playing in the Dhaka League since 2005. In all these years, including stints in the Premier League and First-Class cricket, I have never faced such a situation," Zakaria told The Daily Star.

"They are unveiling the trophy over there while we, who cannot play, are standing here. This is truly a sad sight for every player. It's not just about the 8-10 teams; nearly 700-800 players are affected."

He continued, "If we have to repeatedly protest just to play, cricket in our country



PARTICIPATING CLUBS:

BKSP, Bangladesh Police Cricket Club, Baridhara Dazzlers, Dhanmondi Sports Club (formerly Bashundhara Riders), Blues Cricketers (formerly Dhaka United), Tri State Cricketers (formerly Dhaka Spartans), Lalmatia Club, Old DOHS Sporting Club, Prime Daleshwar Sporting Club, Sheikh Jamal Cricketers, Shinepukur Cricket Club, Uttara Cricket Club

NON-PARTICIPATING CLUBS:

Partex Sporting Club, Gazi Tyres Cricket Academy, Amber Sporting Club, Khelaghar SKS, Surjotorun Club, Kakrail Boys Club, Kalabagan Krira Chakra, Orient Sporting Club

will never progress. We seek talented players, but our structure is flawed. Everyone claims they want the good of cricket, but the reality seems different.

"If the board truly cared about cricket, they would allow the game to continue without disruption."

At the trophy ceremony, participating

players expressed relief but also lamented the absence of colleagues. Sheikh Antor of Tri State Cricketers -- formerly Dhaka Titans -- said they felt "sad that many brothers cannot play this year."

Following the protest, a delegation met BCB officials, including directors Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, Ittekhhar Rahman Mithu,

Abul Bashar, and CEO Nizam Uddin Chowdhury. Players handed over a letter to the CEO requesting uninterrupted participation, protection of professional interests, and clarification on league operations.

Asaduzzaman Prince of Khelaghar SKS, whose team is not participating, outlined four demands: a fixed schedule, prompt resolution of disputes, a stable professional structure, and increased match fees and daily allowances. He added that players also sought clear guidelines on payments and called for either a full 20-team league or a franchise-based tournament.

"Their (BCB officials') response was that the president is currently outside the country, and so they are not able to make an instant commitment about what support they can provide," said Prince, further informing that the board is willing to proceed with the 12 participating teams but promised to explore franchise options for the remaining eight clubs.

The Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis chairman Adnan Rahman Dipon expressed hope that absent clubs might join. He said he would wait until the following day, noting no communication from the rebel clubs.

As the league opens, uncertainty lingers. The main losers remain the players, and by extension, Bangladesh cricket, as board-club disputes show little sign of resolution.



Having missed Wednesday's Champions League defeat by Manchester City due to injury, Real Madrid forward Kylian Mbappe is fit to face Alaves in LaLiga on Sunday. With just two wins in their last eight games and sitting four points behind league leaders Barcelona, Xabi Alonso's side hope to turn their fortunes around.

PHOTO: REAL MADRID