



SPORTS REPORTER

Sylhet wore a subdued look yesterday as Bangladesh pacer Mustafizur Rahman was released by Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) ahead of the upcoming Indian Premier League (IPL) season, the chill of the ongoing winter cold wave reflecting the mood.

The development overshadowed a scheduled rest day in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) T20. Most teams relaxed at hotels or explored the city, while bottom-placed Noakhali Express trained at Sylhet Outer Stadium after returning from Dhaka the previous night.

Earlier in the day, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) inaugurated its Sylhet Regional Office at a city hotel, part of its decentralisation and grassroots development efforts, with little indication at the time of the storm that would follow.

The mood changed sharply when it emerged that KKR had released Mustafizur following instructions from the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). Indian media reported the franchise had faced pressure from right-wing political and religious groups over concerns regarding minority safety in



Bangladesh.

Journalists waited for hours for an official response before BCB president Aminul Islam Bulbul confirmed the board had convened an emergency online meeting later in the night to assess the situation and determine its stance. BCB media committee chairman Amzad

Hossain said that player dignity, safety and security remain the board's top priorities.

The development has triggered wider debate, with calls for Bangladesh to request the International Cricket Council (ICC) to move their T20 World Cup matches from India. Bangladesh, in Group C, are scheduled to face West Indies (February 7), Italy (February 9) and England (February 14) at Kolkata's Eden Gardens, and Nepal (February 17) at Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium.

"If anything happens, the damage will be ours alone," said former Bangladesh captain and Noakhali head coach Khaled Mahmud. "I think BCB and the Bangladesh government should formally request the ICC to shift the matches to another country."

Rangpur Riders assistant coach Mohammad Ashraful, whose team features Mustafizur in the BPL, voiced his disappointment. "This was the first time Mustafizur truly got what he deserved at the IPL auction," Ashraful said. "Cricket should remain cricket. I hope the governments and boards of both countries resolve the matter. Personally, I believe teams should tour every country,

and the host nation must ensure security," he added.

Mustafizur has played for several IPL franchises over the last decade, breaking through with Sunrisers Hyderabad in 2016 and bagging the Emerging Player Award -- still the only overseas player to win the accolade in IPL history.

His BPL team Rangpur also showed support on social media, posting: "Opportunities may be taken away, but respect is earned on the field. We stand with 'The Fizz'."

Fizz's 9.2 crore rupee IPL payout remains uncertain, as he did not voluntarily withdraw and was removed under BCCI instructions -- a situation unprecedented in IPL history.

The episode comes amid strained Bangladesh-India cricket ties. The BCCI recently postponed India's men's tour of Bangladesh and did not host the women's team in December. Although the BCB has slated a bilateral series for September 2026, its prospects remain uncertain.

With the coming days expected to be crucial, the developments involving the BCCI and KKR may further test both cricketing and diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and India.

Junior Tigers eye World Cup glory

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Under-19 skipper Azizul Hakim Tamim believes his side's prior experience in Zimbabwe will give them an edge in the upcoming ICC U-19 World Cup as he sets his sights on lifting the trophy.

The junior Tigers will depart for Zimbabwe on Sunday night for the 16th edition of the tournament, which begins on January 15. Although Namibia are co-hosts, Bangladesh will play all their Group A matches in Zimbabwe.

The 15-member squad has been playing together for the past two years, including a tour of Zimbabwe for a tri-series involving South Africa in July last year, where they emerged champions -- a confidence-boosting experience ahead of the global event.

Despite failing to reach the final of the recent ACC U-19 Asia Cup in the UAE -- a tournament they had won in the previous two editions -- Tamim said his side is "mentally and physically confident" for the challenge, following the official photo session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur on Saturday.

"We've played in Zimbabwe before, so we



understand the conditions. We've also prepared over the last few days...Inshallah, we are going there with the target of becoming champions," Tamim said.

In a tough Group A, Bangladesh will face India, New Zealand and USA.

However, Tamim remains unfazed at the prospect of facing such big names, saying they have done their homework on their opponents and insisting that their "focus remains on teamwork."

Bangladesh, champions of the 2020 edition in South Africa, will play two warm-up matches against Pakistan and Scotland before the tournament.

SHORT CORNER

Cuba Mitchell leaves Bangladesh, citing unpaid salaries at Kings

Following the footsteps of defender Tariq Kazi, midfielder Cuba Mitchell has left Bashundhara Kings, citing unpaid wages. Cuba, who joined the five-time Bangladesh league champions at the end of July, departed for England after posting a lengthy statement on social media in which he alleged that salary payments were due from the club.

Shooting federation suspends Koly following her allegations

The Bangladesh Shooting Sports Federation has temporarily suspended national team shooter Kamrunnahr Koly for allegedly violating the code of conduct of the national team training camp. The decision was communicated to Koly's employers, the Bangladesh Navy, through a letter sent on January 1. The federation has also informed the Bangladesh Olympic Association about the suspension.

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Bangladesh Police and Border guard Bangladesh (inset) players celebrate after winning the women's and men's titles respectively at the National Kabaddi Championship at the Shaheed Captain M Mansur Ali National Handball Stadium yesterday. BGB edged past Bangladesh Army 33-28 in a thrilling men's final, while Police defeated Bangladesh Ansar & VDP 36-31 in the women's decider. Police's Sraboni Mallick and BGB's Al Amin were named the tournament's best players.

PHOTO: BKF

Lacklustre BFL drifts into uncertainty

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings barely held on to the top spot as the Bangladesh Football League (BFL) concluded a low-key and controversy-hit first phase, sliding into uncertainty amid player departures, poor planning and broadcast failures.

The nine-round first phase of the 10-team league ended on Saturday with four matches played across four venues. The most startling result came in Manikganj, where eighth-placed Young Men's Fakirerpool staged a remarkable comeback from 3-0 down to hold leaders Kings to a 3-3 draw, scoring all three goals in the final 15 minutes.

The result, following a defeat and a draw in Kings' previous two matches, still allowed the five-time champions to retain top spot with 18 points from nine matches. Fortis FC joined them on 18 points after a 2-0 win over PWD SC, while Abahani climbed to fifth place, five points adrift of the leaders, with a 3-0 victory against Arambagh.

Rahmatganj and Bangladesh Police FC remained third and fourth

respectively with 15 and 14 points after a 1-1 draw.

While the congested top half of the table may suggest fierce competition, the reality has been a noticeable drop in quality and intensity in the rebranded BFL compared to previous seasons.



Amer Khan, manager of seventh-placed Brothers Union, blamed the unprofessionalism of the Professional League Management Committee for his team's struggles. "The intermittent breaks have hampered our progress. League committee meetings hardly take place and we have not been informed when the league will

resume," Amer told The Daily Star.

Following the ninth round, the league has entered an extended break with no confirmed restart date. The BFF said the mid-term transfer window will run from January 4 to 31, during which all league and Federation Cup matches will be suspended. A tentative February 6 restart has been discussed, but national elections scheduled for February 12 are likely to force a further delay.

Financial instability has also taken its toll. Kings saw Cuban Mitchell announce his departure on social media, alleging unpaid wages -- echoing claims made earlier by defender Tariq Kazi. With the league's most affluent club struggling, others are barely surviving.

"We were supposed to receive a share of broadcast revenue, but nothing has been paid yet," Amer alleged, questioning the logic of a long mid-term window when most clubs are unwilling to sign new players. Abahani manager and BFF executive member Satyajit Das

Rupu echoed similar concerns.

"We are looking forward to the federation's directives to decide on the team's training," Rupu said.

Beyond the lack of quality on the pitch and administrative shortcomings, broadcast and marketing failures have emerged as the most widely criticised aspects of Bangladesh's top-tier league this season. Midway through the first phase, the BFF announced a title sponsorship agreement with Malaysian petroleum giant Petronas, only to withdraw the claim within 24 hours. Meanwhile, branding of the league's new sponsor, United Healthcare, has been largely absent across all five venues.

Broadcasting has further frustrated supporters, with one entire round of matches going untelevised and the remaining fixtures shown with outdated production quality. Poor camera work and substandard coverage have made viewing on YouTube and OTT platforms a trying experience for fans.



Aston Villa midfielder John McGinn celebrates after scoring his second goal in a 3-1 Premier League win over Nottingham Forest at Villa Park yesterday. McGinn struck twice in the second half, while Ollie Watkins found the net for the fourth time in three matches, as Villa bounced back from their midweek mauling by Arsenal and provisionally climbed to second in the table. The victory leaves Villa on 42 points, three behind league leaders Arsenal and one clear of Manchester City.

PHOTO: REUTERS