

## Confidence projected as uncertainty persists

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Sylhet

With less than a month to go before the ICC T20 World Cup begins on February 7, the national team players should be using the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) to iron out their flaws before the big dance. Instead, they are left in limbo, uncertain whether they will even take part in the tournament.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) wrote to the International Cricket Council (ICC) for the second time on Thursday, outlining security concerns over travelling to India, and is now awaiting a response from the world cricket's governing body, which is expected to arrive soon.

Amid such uncertainty, Bangladesh named a 15-member squad for the event on Sunday – with scope to make changes till January 31.

Preparing for the World Cup in such a scenario could take a mental toll on the players. However, all-rounder Mahedi Hasan – captain of the Chattogram Royals and one of the 15 named for World Cup – played down the issue after leading his side to a two-wicket win over Rajshahi Warriors in Sylhet on Friday.

"Uncertainty is a management issue – something for the officials to deal with. The players' job is simply to play," Mahedi said after the match.

"Even if you send players to Mars, they will go and play. I don't think any player has any doubts about that," he added.

But not everyone shared Mahedi's confidence. His counterpart in the same match and the player who led Bangladesh in the previous T20 World Cup, Najmul Hossain Shanto, had a different take.

Shanto, who is not part of the World Cup for the upcoming edition, said from past experiences that such events do affect players, even though they often prefer not to speak about it publicly.

"You'll notice that before every World Cup, something or other happens with us. As a player who has played in a few World Cups, I can tell you that such things have an effect," he said after the match.

"We put on an act that nothing affects us, that we are highly professional cricketers. But even you all know that we are acting. It's not easy. "In my view, players still try to figure out how to put these things aside and perform for the team. But it would be better if these issues didn't exist. At the same time, I'd say this situation is beyond our [players'] control."



## PING-PONG TO PERFECTION

Italy's Jannik Sinner (left) and Spain's Carlos Alcaraz fine-tune their reflexes with a friendly table tennis match at Hyundai Card headquarters in Seoul on Friday, using the fast-paced game as a warm-up for their lawn tennis duel. The two archrivals -- who have claimed nine of the last 10 Grand Slam titles between them -- meet in the Hyundai Card Super Match at Inspire Arena today, just eight days before the Australian Open begins at Melbourne Park. Both players also spoke of the possibility of one day joining forces as doubles partners.

PHOTO: AFP

## Hockey's 'slap', shot put power make cricketer Juairiya

**Juairiya Ferdous**, who earned a maiden call-up to the national team for the upcoming ICC Women's T20 World Cup Qualifiers in Nepal starting January 18, has not only represented Bangladesh in multiple sports but also excelled in disciplines like hockey, kabaddi, and athletics. In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star's **Abdullah Al Mehdi**, the 20-year-old wicketkeeper-batter spoke about her batting approach, childhood dreams, and how her multi-sport journey shaped her cricketing identity. The excerpts are as follows:

**DS:** How do you feel about your maiden national team call-up?

**Juairiya Ferdous (JF):** The feeling is wonderful and honestly hard to put into words. Since childhood, I have dreamt of playing for the national team. Now that I have this opportunity, I will try to utilise it and give something good back to my country.

**DS:** The selectors emphasised your 'clean-hitting'. What is your Powerplay approach?

**JF:** I feel very confident batting in the Powerplay. With only two fielders outside the circle, I feel confident to play big shots.

**DS:** Do you think you will be assigned wicketkeeping duties in the qualifiers?

**JF:** Our captain and another opener are also wicketkeepers, but I am always prepared. I have been keeping wickets since inter-school level. My mother encouraged me to take it up to avoid the toll and injuries associated with pace bowling.

**DS:** You have played many sports and won three golds at the 2023 Bangladesh Youth



Games. Where did this fascination come from?

**JF:** My mother is a physical education teacher at a high school. I grew up watching her train girls in athletics, kabaddi, handball, volleyball, cricket, table tennis, and badminton. Naturally, I started participating in these events for my school.

**DS:** Are you still involved in these sports while studying?

**JF:** I don't play them regularly now, but I compete in university games. I am a third-year student at Dhaka University and have won championships in athletics, handball, volleyball, and swimming at university level. Since I miss some classes due to practice, my teachers consider my attendance, and my friends help with notes.

**DS:** You were once part of the national hockey team. Why shift focus to cricket?

**JF:** Representing Bangladesh in hockey was the first best feeling of my life. But the future and facilities in cricket are better in our country. In 2020, while in Dhaka for a

hockey tournament, my mother suggested I attend the women's cricket camp at BKSP. I was selected from 200 girls for a six-month camp. The coaches said that I had the natural power to succeed in cricket.

**DS:** You won three gold medals in one day at the Bangladesh Youth Games. Tell us about that.

**JF:** I won gold in shot put in the morning and set a record. Immediately afterwards, I took my hockey gear and went to the field for the final, and won another gold. In the evening, we won the kabaddi match for the third gold. I have represented Bangladesh in both hockey and cricket and was called to national camps for hockey and kabaddi.

But because contact sports carry risks, I decided to focus on cricket from the U-19 World Cup phase. Still, I am proud of my hockey journey, and I miss it.

**DS:** How have other sports influenced your cricket?

**JF:** My batting power comes from athletics, especially shot put. The 'slap' or hitting techniques from hockey significantly helped my bat swing and sweeps in cricket. Also, the intense fitness and footwork required for hockey helped me perform better in cricket.

## Transfer bans threaten Kings, Abahani's AFC hopes

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings and Abahani Limited could miss out on the 2026-27 AFC Challenge League after running into difficulties in securing AFC club licences due to FIFA-imposed transfer bans.

Last season, despite finishing second and third in the Bangladesh Football League (BFL), Abahani and Kings represented the country in the AFC Challenge League because champions Mohammedan failed to meet the mandatory licensing requirement.

This time, however, the scenario has changed. Both Kings and Abahani are currently under FIFA transfer bans, casting doubt over their eligibility for continental competition.

Following a letter from the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF), eight clubs -- including Kings and Abahani -- expressed interest in obtaining AFC club licences by the December 28 deadline, with Fakirerpool Young Men's Club and Arambagh KS opting out. The BFF began the licensing process on January 1, setting March 31 as the deadline for document submission.

Under AFC rules, BFL champions are nominated for the AFC Challenge League only if they hold an



AFC club licence. If not, the opportunity passes to the next-placed teams, again subject to licensing approval.

With Bangladesh's three leading clubs -- Kings, Abahani and Mohammedan -- all under transfer bans, the door could open for newer clubs to feature in Asia's third-tier competition, provided they secure AFC licences.

However, there remains a narrow window for the banned clubs.

"Clubs under FIFA transfer bans can take part in the licensing process, but must clear their overdue payables before March 31," said BFF competition manager Zaber Bin Taher Ansary. "If the bans are lifted before that date, they will become eligible."

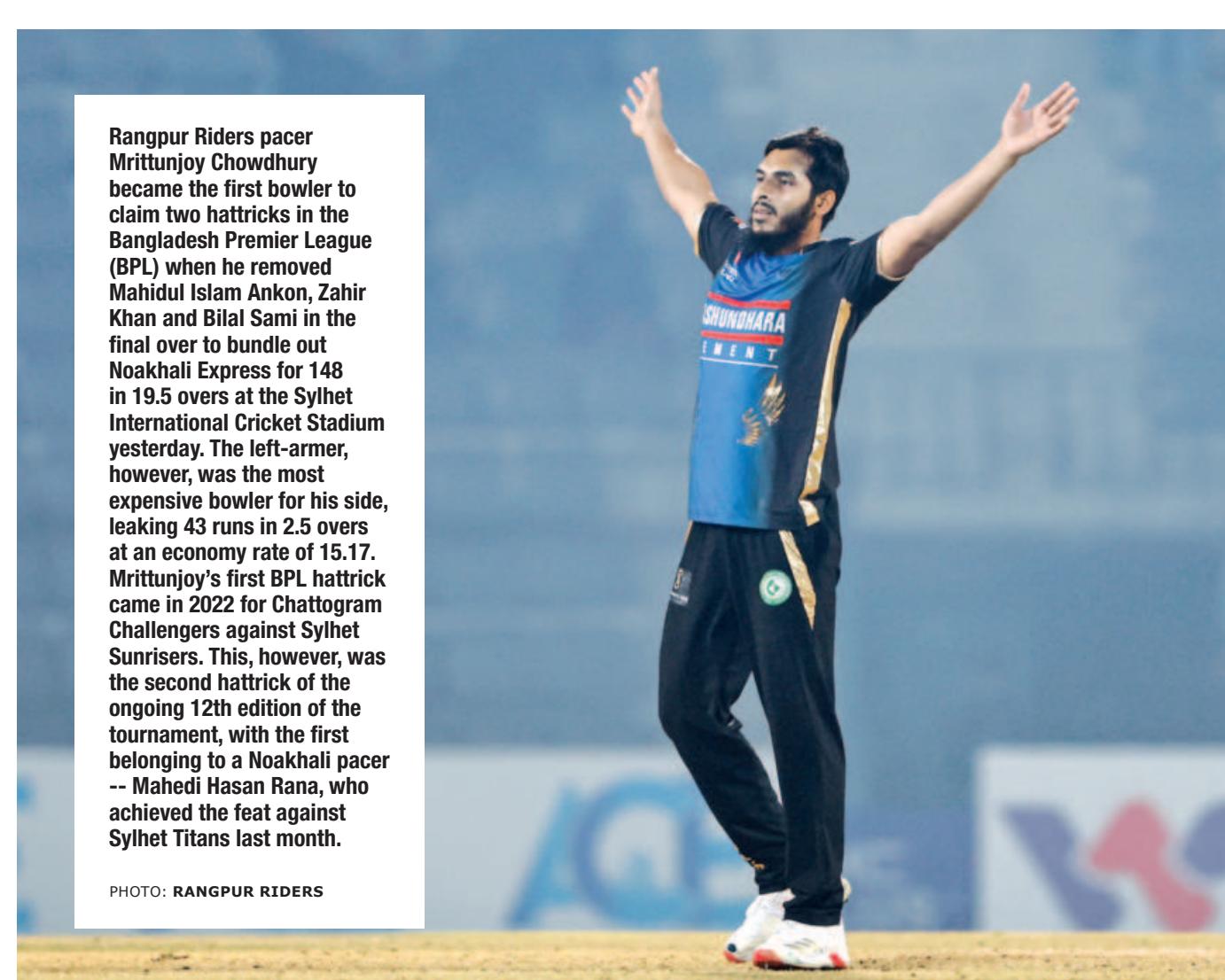
At present, uncertainty persists.

Kings were handed bans for three registration windows following eight cases, with the latest imposed on November 12, 2025, while Abahani received theirs on November 24. Mohammedan were banned earlier on October 29 due to a single unresolved payment issue.

On the field, Bashundhara Kings are joint leaders with Fortis FC after the first phase of the BFL, followed by Rahmatganj, Bangladesh Police, Abahani and Mohammedan.

**Rangpur Riders pacer Mrittunjoy Chowdhury** became the first bowler to claim two hattricks in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) when he removed Mahidul Islam Ankon, Zahir Khan and Bilal Sami in the final over to bundle out Noakhali Express for 148 in 19.5 overs at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday. The left-arm, however, was the most expensive bowler for his side, leaking 43 runs in 2.5 overs at an economy rate of 15.17. Mrittunjoy's first BPL hattrick came in 2022 for Chattogram Challengers against Sylhet Sunrisers. This, however, was the second hattrick of the ongoing 12th edition of the tournament, with the first belonging to a Noakhali pacer -- Mahedi Hasan Rana, who achieved the feat against Sylhet Titans last month.

PHOTO: RANGPUR RIDERS



## Tempers flare as Real set up clasico final

STAR SPORTS DESK

Thursday saw Xabi Alonso's Real Madrid get revenge on city rivals Atletico Madrid with a 2-1 win in a tight Spanish Super Cup semifinal in Saudi Arabia. Federico Valverde breaking his goal duck for the season with a screamer of a free-kick, and Real setting up a Clasico Super Cup final clash against rivals Barcelona -- but even amid all these intriguing highlights, the post-match discussion was dominated by Atletico coach Diego Simeone's clash with Vinicius Junior.

The victory also served as payback for Madrid after Atletico had humiliated them 5-2 in a LaLiga derby in September last year.

Simeone was first seen debating Vinicius in the first half. The confrontation continued later, with



Simeone repeatedly telling the forward that Real "were going to get rid of him." Both were eventually shown yellow cards as Vinicius was substituted late in the game.

After the match, Simeone refused to elaborate on the exchange. "I have nothing to say. What happens on the pitch," he told Movistar, before adding in his news conference: "I don't remember, my memory is complicated."

Alonso, however, criticised the Atletico coach's behaviour. "I didn't like it. Those things cross a line in terms of respect for a colleague... There's a limit," he said.

Vinicius later taunted Simeone on social media, commenting "you've lost another knockout tie" on an Instagram reel posted by journalist Fabrizio Romano featuring the touchline incident.

Madrid will now face Barcelona in Sunday's final at the King Abdullah Sports City stadium, and Alonso confirmed that French superstar Kylian Mbappe, who missed the semifinal with a knee sprain, is fit to play and will join the squad ahead of the showdown.



Having closed out 2025 in stellar fashion by winning as many as six trophies, PSG got their hands on the first trophy of the 2026 season on Thursday. Saving efforts from Olympique de Marseille's Matt O'Riley and Hamed Traore, PSG goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier emerged as the hero for the French champions, who claimed their fourth consecutive French Super Cup by beating their rivals 4-1 in a penalty shootout after a dramatic 2-2 draw in Kuwait.

PHOTO: AFP