

SPORT

What to WATCH

STAR SPORTS 2
Big Bash League
Sydney Sixers vs Sydney Thunder
Live from 2:15 pm
STAR SPORTS NETWORK
U-19 World Cup

Australia vs Ireland
Live from 1:30 pm
Afghanistan vs South Africa
Live from 1:30 pm
Pakistan vs England
Live from 1:30 pm



PROVOKED INTO PROTEST?

BCB president Aminul Islam Bulbul was seen looking clueless in the middle of the pitch in Mirpur yesterday as cricketers turned a no-show for BPL games in protest against remarks from a board director.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

EKUSH TAPADER

A handful of spectators waited in the stands, clinging to the hope that the Dhaka phase of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) would eventually begin yesterday. But as evening fell, security personnel of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) asked them to leave. What followed in the empty stadium was a light show, its flashes only underlining the darkness.

The BPL has long been no stranger to controversy, but never on this scale.

The escalation of tensions intensified since Wednesday night. At the Home of Cricket in Mirpur, BCB director M Najmul Islam made controversial remarks about the players. Within hours, the Cricketers' Welfare Association of Bangladesh (CWAB) announced a hardline stance: players would not take the field unless Najmul stepped down.

Yesterday, the opening day of the final Dhaka phase, the players held firm. No team turned up. With no option left, the matches were called off. While the first game was scheduled for 1:00 pm, the players were holding a press conference at their team hotel, which

began at 2:30 pm.

It soon became clear that director Najmul's comments were only the trigger. What followed was an outpouring of long-simmering grievances.

Alongside all centrally contracted players, captains from all three formats — Najmul Hossain Shanto, Mehidy Hasan Miraz and Liton Das — were particularly vocal. Never before has the BCB found itself in such a public and total deadlock.

The roots of the crisis run deep: after last year's election — boycotted by most organisers — the new board led by Aminul Islam Bulbul soured ties with Dhaka clubs, leaving eight First Division teams withdrawn, dozens of players without livelihoods, and the Dhaka Premier League's future uncertain, with no solution yet from the board.

CWAB president Mithun said the players see little sincerity in resolving these issues, describing a culture of deflection and inertia. "One person says the other can't be reached," he said, adding that when it comes to solving players'

problems, "no one is available".

Shanto raised the unresolved harassment allegation involving women's cricketer Jahanara Alam. Although a committee was formed, its report has yet to be made public. He said everyone had hoped for a "swift and fair decision", but the delay had been deeply disappointing and had discouraged others from coming forward.

Liton highlighted poor facilities in women's cricket, while Shamsur Rahman Shuvo criticised the handling of fixing allegations. Ahead of this year's BPL, nine players were barred from the auction over suspected misconduct without evidence, yet allowed in other domestic leagues, creating confusion and stigma. The tournament itself has been mired in controversy: promised transparency and committee reports remain unpublished, its structure unstable, with a sixth team added before another franchise pulled out, forcing the BCB to take over.

All this has unfolded as the board remains locked in negotiations with the ICC over venue changes and its refusal to travel to India

for the upcoming World Cup. Ironically, Mustafizur Rahman — whose "respect" the BCB has cited in its communications — was present at the players' press conference, joining the protest after feeling his dignity had been undermined by the board director's remarks.

The uncertainty surrounding World Cup participation has also unsettled the squad. Only two days earlier, CWAB leaders had said security was the board's responsibility but that there was "no alternative" to playing the tournament.

The atmosphere is now suffocating. Despite repeated controversial remarks — including Najmul earlier labelling former captain Tamim Iqbal an "Indian agent" — no disciplinary action has been taken, nor has the BCB formally condemned the comments. The president has instead dismissed them as "personal opinions".

In this deadlock, Bangladesh cricket is bound to suffer. But beyond lost fixtures — and the risk of broadcasters and sponsors backing away — what unfolded yesterday cut deeper, forcing a reckoning with what Bangladesh cricket has been and what it now risks becoming.



TIGERS' T20 WC FATE 'ICC delegation likely to arrive soon'

SPORTS REPORTER

A delegation from the International Cricket Council (ICC) is expected to visit Bangladesh to discuss the participation of the Bangladesh team in the ICC T20 World Cup, scheduled to be held in India and Sri Lanka from February 7.

Sports Adviser Asif Nazrul shared the development while briefing the media at the Foreign Service Academy yesterday.

"According to the latest updates, Mr. Aminul Islam [BCB President Aminul Islam Bulbul] informed me that an ICC team is likely to come to Bangladesh for discussions. There is no chance of us changing our stance. We are eager to play in the World Cup, particularly in Sri Lanka, and I strongly believe that organising this is not impossible," the sports adviser said.

"We are in discussions, and a delegation is set to arrive, but the exact date has not been determined. We are in communication, but the time is not fixed," a BCB official said on condition of anonymity.

Last Tuesday, the BCB leadership held a video conference with the ICC. Following the meeting, the board reaffirmed its decision not to send the team to India, citing security concerns, and reiterated its request to relocate the team's matches outside India. The ICC asked the BCB to reconsider its stance, but the board remained firm.

Both the BCB and ICC, however, have agreed to continue discussions "to explore possible solutions."



'Quick play' pays off as Sabina shines

SPORTS REPORTER

A day after the men's team held a strong Indian side to a thrilling 4-4 draw, the women's side went a step further by kicking off their SAFF Futsal Championship campaign with an emphatic 3-1 victory over India in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday.

"I think the people in Bangladesh are happy with a victory over India. We still have five matches left. Everyone pray for us so that we can make the Bangladeshi people happier, which is our main target," said skipper Sabina Khatun, who broke the deadlock after playing neat one-two passes with Krishna.

The women in red and green looked the better side throughout, with Sabina once again scoring from a Krishna Rani pass in the first half.

Saeid Khodarahmi, coach of both the men's and women's futsal sides, explained why the girls had the upper hand against India. "My players were quick in play," the Iranian coach said.

After resumption, Matsushima Sumaya's strike took the game away from India, who found a consolation goal from Arya Dhanaji More in the latter part of the second half. The men's team will be in action again today against Maldives, while Sabina's troops are set to face Bhutan tomorrow.

Fencer Fatema's return adds shine to President Cup

SPORTS REPORTER

After recovering from a knee injury, 2019 South Asian Games gold medallist Fatema Mujib is set to return to competitive fencing when the President Cup Fencing Championships begin at the Shaheed Captain M Mansur Ali Handball Stadium in Paltan today.

Fatema, who won gold in the sabre event at the 7th National Fencing Championship in April last year, missed the July Revolution Fencing Championships in August after sustaining the injury during preparations for the SA Games. She later underwent surgery at the Combined Military Hospital and was advised by doctors to take a full four-month rest.

Her comeback is expected to add extra sparkle to the four-day tournament, which will feature around 250 fencers from 18 teams, including various districts, Bangladesh Army, Navy, Ansar and

VDP, Border Guard Bangladesh, private universities, and other educational institutions and clubs. Competitions will be held in individual and team foil, epee, and sabre events.

"Fatema is now fully fit to play following her four-month absence," said Bangladesh Fencing Federation president Kamal Islam. "We are also working with other promising fencers to help them step up."

He added that Fatema has become a symbol of fencing in the country. "Many have taken up the sport after being inspired by her success at the SA Games."

The President Cup is also seen as a key preparatory event for next year's International Fencing Championships in Nepal and the Asian Fencing Championships in India in June.

Like the July Revolution Fencing Championships, Suzuki Motorbike Bangladesh is once again sponsoring the tournament, organisers confirmed at a press briefing.



Morocco's Achrif Hakimi celebrates with teammates after the Atlas Lions edged Nigeria 4-2 on penalties in the first Africa Cup of Nations semifinal, while Senegal's Sadio Mane consoles Egypt's Mohamed Salah after the second semifinal. Hosts Morocco will face Mane's Senegal in Monday's final after both teams survived tense last-four clashes on Wednesday, ending Salah's hopes of lifting the trophy once again. Senegal booked their place with a 78th-minute winner from Mane in a 1-0 victory over Egypt in Tangiers, with the forward later revealing it would be his final AFCON appearance.

PHOTO: AFP