

## Star power influx as BPL enters business end

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) T20 is set for a glamorous surge as it enters its knockout phase today, with franchises racing to strengthen their squads through high profile international signings as the title race intensifies.

Sylhet Titans, who finished fourth in the league stage with 10 points from 10 matches, received a major boost ahead of their eliminator against Rangpur Riders in Mirpur after securing the services of English wicketkeeper-batter Sam Billings, who joined the squad yesterday.

His availability, Sylhet said in a press release, adds "experience and tactical depth" at a time when "clarity, composure and execution matter most".

Billings, who recently represented Sydney Thunder in the Big Bash League, follows the signing of English pacer Chris Woakes for the knockout stages, further strengthening Sylhet's overseas contingent already boasting the likes of Moeen Ali, Ethan Brooks and Salman Irfash.

"We've got a great team, a lot of bases covered," Brooks told reporters, adding that confidence is high as the side looks to get the job done.

Meanwhile, league leaders Rajshahi Warriors, up against Chattogram Royals in the first qualifier today, are eyeing what could be the biggest signing of the tournament, with New Zealand batter Kane



Williamson a potential late addition.

Williamson, currently with Durban's Super Giants in the SA20, may join depending on Durban's elimination and Rajshahi's progress in the BPL.

"We're looking for a middle-order batter, and Williamson fits perfectly," a Rajshahi official told The Daily Star, adding that they hope to have him for at least one match.

New Zealand all-rounder James Neesham, who has extended his contract with Rajshahi for the full season, also sounded optimistic.

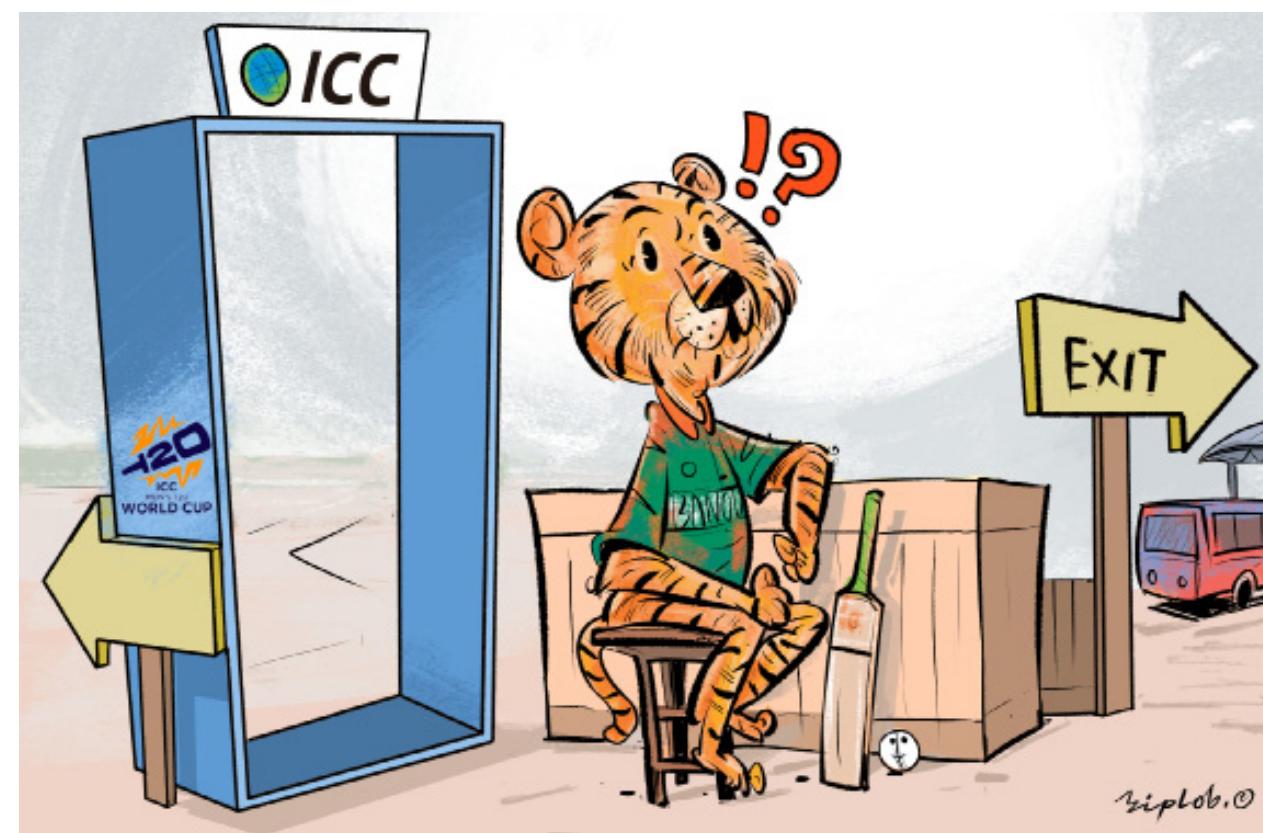
"We speak pretty regularly and have spoken in the last few days about him coming over for the back end of the competition," Neesham said.

"He is still involved with the SA20 currently, so a couple of results have to eventuate for that to happen, but fingers crossed we can get him into Bangladesh."

Apart from Neesham, Rajshahi's squad currently includes Sahibzada Farhan, Ryan Burl, Binura Fernando, Hussain Talat, Sandeep Lamichhane and Jahandad Khan.

Meanwhile, officials from Rangpur and Chattogram confirmed they are not planning to bring in any new foreign players for the playoffs and will rely on their existing squads for today's matches.

As the BPL enters its most decisive stretch, the stakes are rising. With international names flying in and finals dreams on the line, the business end of the tournament promises drama, flair and high-octane cricket -- exactly what the competition was meant to offer.



## Three weeks, many narratives

Which truth will finally be revealed?

ASHFAQ UL ALAM

A little over three weeks into the talks between the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) and the International Cricket Council (ICC) regarding the former's request to relocate Bangladesh's T20 World Cup matches from India, where do both parties stand?

The answer to this question depends on whom you're asking.

Yesterday, the BCB refuted reports from Monday, which claimed the ICC has set a deadline of January 21 for the board to decide whether it would send the team to India for the marquee event, also co-hosted by Sri Lanka.

"They [ICC delegation] told us that they will inform the ICC about the issues and will let us know about the decision later on. In regard to these talks, they haven't mentioned a specific date or when they will let us know," BCB media committee chairman Amzad Hossain told the media in a press briefing yesterday.

Earlier, after the meeting between BCB officials and an ICC delegation, the board had claimed in its official statement that the idea of swapping Bangladesh from Group C to B, in place of Ireland -- scheduled to play their group matches in Sri Lanka -- was floated in the meeting.

However, that very day, a Cricket Ireland official was quoted on media that it has received reassurance from ICC that they would not be swapped from their group.

This butting of differing narratives has been a constant ever since the BCB

sent a letter to the ICC, requesting relocation on January 4.

Soon after Bangladesh's request, some Indian media outlets claimed that the ICC was redrafting the tournament schedule. Later, the same outlets reported that the ICC had taken a hardline stance, setting a deadline for the BCB and preparing to announce Scotland as a replacement.

Throughout this period, the ICC has remained tight-lipped, offering no formal response, while the BCB has issued multiple press releases and briefed the media to clarify its position -- staying firm on its initial decision of not sending the team to India due to security reasons.

Beyond the noise of claims and counter-claims, the broader issue is how the ICC has historically dealt with such impasses.

The BCB requesting reallocation with a little over a month before the tournament, beginning February 7, put the ICC in a tough spot, but not an unfamiliar one.

Just like Bangladesh, Australia and India have also refused to send their teams for an ICC event, and the situations were handled very differently by the ICC.

When Cricket Australia announced it won't compete in the 2016 U-19 World Cup in Bangladesh due to security threat and government directive just three weeks before the tournament began, the ICC named Ireland as replacement that very day.

Whereas when Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) announced it

would not send its team to Pakistan for the 2025 ICC Champions Trophy in November 2024, demanding to play its matches in a neutral venue, the ICC proceeded by arranging multiple meetings with both parties, trying to broker a deal.

Eventually, it introduced a hybrid model for all ICC events hosted in either India or Pakistan till 2028. Under this arrangement, neither team would play matches in the other country for a total of four ICC events.

There are two key differences between Bangladesh and India's refusals. The BCCI had pulled out months ahead of the tournament, while Bangladesh did it after the tournament schedule was announced.

However, in India's case, the ICC brought in another country as hosts and also agreed to carry on with this cumbersome arrangement for future ICC events.

Courtesy of that arrangement, Sri Lanka emerged as a co-host for the upcoming T20 World Cup, where Bangladesh want to play their matches.

Switching Bangladesh to a different group would undoubtedly disrupt the preparations of other teams, but those same teams had no qualms in bearing the brunt of extra travel in ICC events to meet India's demands.

With time running out, how ICC eventually handles this situation would either go down as another avenue for case study when measuring the imbalance that exists in the cricketing world or set a new example in this regard.

SONY SPORTS 1, 2, 5	
BPL	(Wednesday): Inter vs Arsenal
Eliminator	Real Madrid vs Monaco
Rangpur vs Sylhet	STAR SPORTS SELECT HD2
Live from 1:00 pm	ICC U19 WC
Qualifier 1	Bangladesh vs New Zealand
Rajshahi vs Chattogram	Live from 11:45 pm
Live from 6:00 pm	Live from 2:00 pm
Live from 6:00 pm	Live from 1:30 pm



## U-19s look to bounce back

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh under-19s will face New Zealand in their second Group B match of the ICC U-19 World Cup on Tuesday at the Queens Sports Club in Bulawayo, hoping to recover from their opening defeat to India and learn from a tactical error.

Bangladesh were well placed in their chase of India's 238 before rain intervened. Set a revised target of 165 in 29 overs, they were 90 for 2 in 17.2 overs but collapsed after the rain break, losing eight wickets for 40 runs to suffer an 18-run defeat under the DLS method.

"We have worked out how we lost the last match and we have talked to the players. However demoralised they were, I feel they are energised now. They will fight and we have hope," team manager Ehsanul Haque told The Daily Star.

Ehsanul further admitted that Bangladesh misjudged the DLS situation after play resumed, playing slowly and allowing the required run rate to rise.

Rain has disrupted training sessions and is also forecast to affect Tuesday's match, which is scheduled to begin at 1:30pm Bangladeshi time. Despite the uncertainty, the team management remains confident in the squad's ability and hopes the players will apply the lessons learned to avoid repeating mistakes as the tournament progresses.

## Djokovic hits Melbourne ton

AGENCIES



Novak Djokovic began his hunt for a record 25th Grand Slam title with his 100th victory at the Australian Open by taming Spain's 71st-ranked Pedro Martinez 6-3, 6-2, 6-2 on Rod Laver Arena on Monday.

Doubts had been raised about Djokovic's preparedness for the major he has won a record 10 times after the 38-year-old skipped the Adelaide tune-up event and cut short practice on Sunday, but he had no trouble sealing a flawless straight sets victory against Pedro.

The win also means Djokovic has reached a century of match wins in three of the four Grand Slams, with 95 at the US Open.

"What can I say? I like the sound of it -- centurion is pretty nice, it's a nice feeling to be a centurion," Djokovic said as a montage of his greatest Melbourne moments on Rod Laver Arena played out on the big screen.

"I'm blessed to be playing at this level and another win here tonight is a dream come true."

While the spotlight has largely swung toward reigning Melbourne champion Jannik Sinner and world number one Carlos Alcaraz, Djokovic reminded the duo of his threat with some sublime tennis yesterday.

"It's definitely my favourite court, a court that has given me so much," added Djokovic, who will next take on Italian qualifier Francesco Masetti.



## AGONY, ECSTASY AND A CHAOTIC FINAL

Senegal clinched their second AFCON title in three editions, but a 1-0 victory over hosts Morocco came only after unpreceded chaos in Rabat on Sunday. The final exploded into drama when Senegal players staged a walk-off protest after a controversial injury-time penalty was awarded to Morocco following a VAR check. FIFA President Gianni Infantino slammed the "unacceptable" scenes, while CAF promised "appropriate action" against those responsible for the 20-minute delay and fan violence. Order was only restored when Sadio Mane, playing his final AFCON game, persuaded his teammates to return. Edouard Mendy subsequently saved tournament top-scorer Brahim Diaz's weak Panenka attempt from the spot, sending the game to extra time. Pape Gueye eventually struck the winner as the Lions celebrated. It was heartbreak for Morocco, who saw their 50-year wait for a second continental crown continue despite playing on home soil.

PHOTO: AFP/REUTERS

STAR SPORTS DESK

Matchday seven of the UEFA Champions League league phase sets the stage for a series of decisive encounters as Europe's elite push for direct qualification to the last 16.

The standout fixture of the round comes at the San Siro on Tuesday when Inter Milan host Arsenal for the second season in a row in a clash loaded with history and high stakes. Arsenal have not won away to an Italian side in the Champions League since their victory over AC Milan in March 2008, failing to register a win in their subsequent five visits (D1 L4) and drawing a blank in all of them.

Inter, however, were beaten at home by an English opponent in their most recent Champions League outing, going down 1-0 to Liverpool on Matchday 6.

The Nerazzurri can nonetheless take confidence from their overall record against the Gunners, having won three of their four previous Champions League meetings. Six points and five places separate the two sides in the league-phase standings, with Inter aiming to avoid an unwanted club first -- three consecutive Champions League

defeats -- after successive losses to Atletico Madrid and Liverpool.

Arsenal arrive in Milan as league-phase leaders and the only team with a 100 percent record so far, eager to seal a top-eight finish ahead of the final round of fixtures on January 28.

The match also pits two of the competition's most resolute defences against each other, with Inter conceding just four goals -- a tally only bettered by Arsenal's solitary goal allowed.

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