

## Won't accept any illogical conditions, says Asif Nazrul

SPORTS REPORTER

Youth and Sports Adviser Asif Nazrul on Tuesday said Bangladesh would not agree to any unreasonable conditions should the International Cricket Council (ICC) attempt to exert pressure regarding the country's participation in the upcoming T20 World Cup.

Speaking to reporters at the Secretariat, Asif said Bangladesh could not be compelled to travel to India under external influence. "If the International Cricket Council (ICC) bows to pressure from the Indian Cricket Board and tries to impose any illogical condition on us, we will not accept," he said.

Responding to a report by French news agency AFP claiming that Scotland could replace Bangladesh if the team refuses to tour India, the adviser said the government had not received any official communication to that effect.

"There are precedents in international cricket, when India refused to play in Pakistan, the ICC changed the venue. We have reasonably asked for a venue change," he added.

Bangladesh recently informed the ICC of its decision not to travel to India for the tournament, citing political tensions and security concerns, and formally requested that its matches be relocated to an alternative venue.

A final decision on Bangladesh's participation and travel arrangements is expected by tonight. The ICC has yet to clarify the process for selecting a replacement team should a participating nation withdraw.



SPORTS REPORTER

It seems as if nothing happening on the pitch is significant enough to overshadow the events unfolding off it.

Yesterday, the Sylhet Titans secured a thrilling three-wicket victory in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) Eliminator, knocking Rangpur Riders out of the tournament. Chris Woakes, signed specifically for the playoffs, propelled Sylhet into Qualifier 2 by hitting a six off the final delivery of a low-scoring contest in Mirpur.

Normally, such an intense finish would be the primary talking point after the game. Instead, an unpleasant reality emerged during the post-match press conference when Bangladesh T20I and Rangpur skipper Litton Das painted a somber picture of helplessness regarding the national team's participation in the upcoming T20 World Cup, set to be co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka from February 7.

"Are you sure we are going to play in the World Cup?" Litton, visibly displeased with Rangpur's result -- and perhaps the overall uncertainty that prevails -- questioned back when



asked whether the type of pitches used in the BPL is ideal preparation for the T20 World Cup.

Bangladesh's World Cup participation currently hangs by a thread due to an impasse between the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) and the International Cricket Council (ICC). This follows the BCB's request to play their World Cup matches outside of India, citing security concerns.

The tension began over a fortnight ago when Mustafizur Rahman was dropped by the Indian Premier League franchise Kolkata Knight Riders on instruction from the Board of Control for

Cricket in India due to political friction between the two nations. This geopolitical standoff now appears to be weighing heavily on the players' mental preparation.

"There is still a long time before the World Cup. We aren't even sure if we are going yet," Litton remarked. "But I can say this much: this is not an ideal wicket for T20s. I don't know if it's [meant for preparation] for the World Cup or not. I expected a better wicket for a qualifier [eliminator] match."

When asked if the BCB had communicated with him or sought his opinion since their January 4 decision not to send the team to

India, Litton's response was a flat "no." He added, "I don't know, but it [communication] hasn't happened with me," when pressed on whether such a dialogue should have occurred.

The exchange highlights the uncertainty within the BCB, revealing that even the primary stakeholders -- the cricketers -- remain in the dark regarding their World Cup fate.

"Look at the situation; many things in life are not ideal. But when a certain time comes, you have to accept it. We played many T20 matches in the BPL -- the [scheduling] wasn't ideal either. But we have to play. What can I say now?" Litton added.

However, the T20 skipper remained tight-lipped when asked about the players' collective stance on the BCB's refusal to travel to India, offering only a brief "no comment." He did note, however, that the 14-day gap between the BPL final on January 23 and the start of the World Cup provides "a lot of opportunity for our mental thinking."

As Litton exited the room, he requested those present not to "take any offense" at his answers. Yet, the interaction only deepened the impression that has gripped the country's cricket for the last 17 days: one of profound uncertainty and helplessness.

## Chattogram romp to BPL final

Captain Mahedi Hasan led from the front, helping Chattogram Royals -- the only franchise managed by the Bangladesh Cricket Board this edition -- become the first team to secure a spot in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) final with a six-wicket win over Rajshahi Warriors in Qualifier 1 at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. Mahedi played a nine-ball 19-run cameo, including a six off pacer Riton Mondol in the final over, to help Chattogram chase down Rajshahi's target of 134 with three balls to spare. On a day when each of the seven bowlers used by Chattogram took at least one wicket, Mahedi also starred with the ball, claiming two for 20 in his four overs. Rajshahi, however, will look to bounce back when they face Sylhet Titans -- who defeated Rangpur Riders in the Eliminator earlier in the day -- in Qualifier 2 today. They are set to receive a boost as their star foreign signing, Kane Williamson, is scheduled to arrive in Dhaka on Wednesday morning.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



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## WOAKES came, played, conquered

Chris Woakes made a dream debut in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) T20 yesterday, delivering a match-winning all-round performance for Sylhet Titans in the Eliminator at Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium. The former England all-rounder,

who arrived in Dhaka just days earlier, took two for 15 in four overs to restrict Rangpur Riders to 111, before sealing a dramatic three-wicket victory with a last-ball six.

"It is very exciting. Winning a game of cricket with a six off the last ball is something I have never

done before," said Woakes, who retired from international cricket in September last year after 217 matches.

"I've been in that situation before and failed, so to get one over the line makes it even more special."

## SHORNA sets new six-hitting record for Tigresses

STAR SPORTS DESK

Shorna Akter produced a record-breaking performance to lead Bangladesh Women to a 30-run victory over Papua New Guinea in their second match of the Women's T20 World Cup Qualifier in Kirtipur, Nepal, on Tuesday.

She smashed 37 runs off just 14 balls, including one four and four sixes, setting a new record for the Tigresses for the most sixes in a WT20I innings, surpassing Aysha Rahman's previous mark of three. Shorna also contributed with the ball, taking one wicket for six runs, and was named player of the match.

This win followed Bangladesh's 21-run victory over the USA in their Group A opener. Batting first at the Tribhuvan University International Cricket Ground, the Tigresses posted a strong total of 168 for five. Papua New Guinea showed resilience in the chase but were bowled out for 138, with three run-outs proving costly.

They will face Namibia in their next Group A match on Thursday at the TU Cricket Ground, followed by their final group match against Ireland on January 24. The top three teams from Group A will advance to the Super Six stage.



## Barcelona eye crucial win in Prague

AGENCIES

Barcelona will be aiming to boost their hopes of securing a top-eight finish in the Champions League when they travel to face Slavia Prague on Wednesday night in a crucial league-stage clash.

The Catalan giants currently sit 15th in the table with 10 points, just two behind eighth-placed Atletico Madrid. With only two matches remaining, Hansi Flick's side know that victories are essential if they are to avoid the playoff round and qualify directly for the knockout stages.

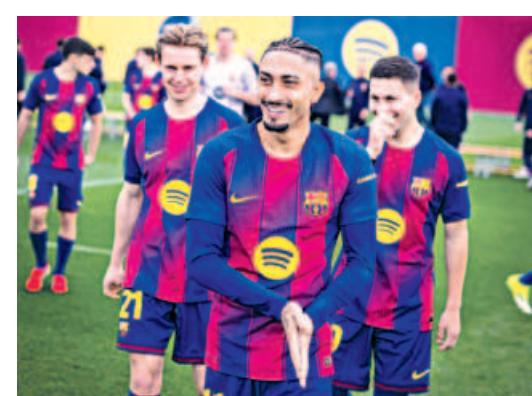
Slavia Prague, meanwhile, find themselves struggling near the bottom of the standings in 33rd place. The Czech champions have endured a difficult European campaign, failing to win any of their six matches so far, with three draws and three defeats leaving them four points off a playoff position.

Their preparation has also been far from ideal, as they have not played a competitive match since mid-December due to the domestic winter break.

Since that time, Slavia have featured only in friendlies, and their lack of match sharpness could prove costly against a Barcelona side eager to bounce back from a disappointing weekend defeat.

Flick's men suffered a shock 2-1 loss to Real Sociedad in LaLiga, a result that trimmed their lead at the top of the Spanish table to just one.

Despite that setback, Barcelona remain confident. They are unbeaten in their last eight matches against Czech opposition, winning



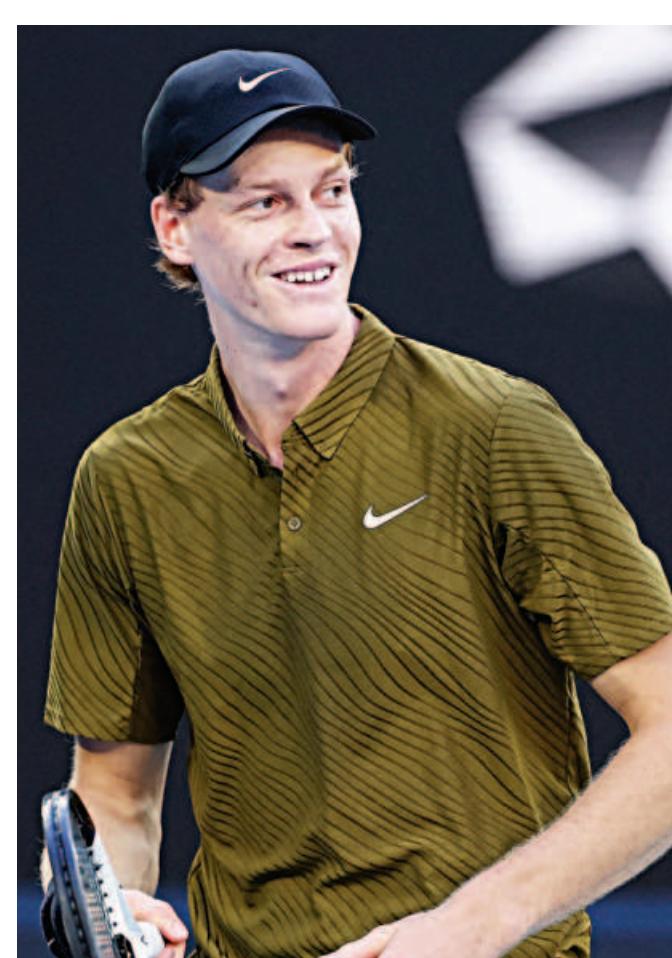
seven of them.

However, recent away form in Europe has been a concern, with only one win from their last five Champions League trips.

Barcelona will be without teenage star Lamine Yamal due to suspension, while Gavi, Andreas Christensen, and Ferran Torres are sidelined with injuries. The return of Raphinha, however, offers Flick a timely boost in attack.

Slavia Prague, under coach Jindrich Trpisovsky, have scored just twice in the competition so far and will need a far more clinical display.

Flick was clear about his expectations ahead of the match. "The result doesn't reflect our performance," he said after the Sociedad defeat. "We have to keep going in this direction. On Wednesday, it's time to win in Prague."



Jannik Sinner and Madison Keys launched their respective Australian Open singles title defences with contrasting victories yesterday, as Sinner advanced after Hugo Gaston retired injured while trailing 6-2, 6-1, and Keys fought back from 4-0 down in the first set to prevail 7-6(6), 6-1.

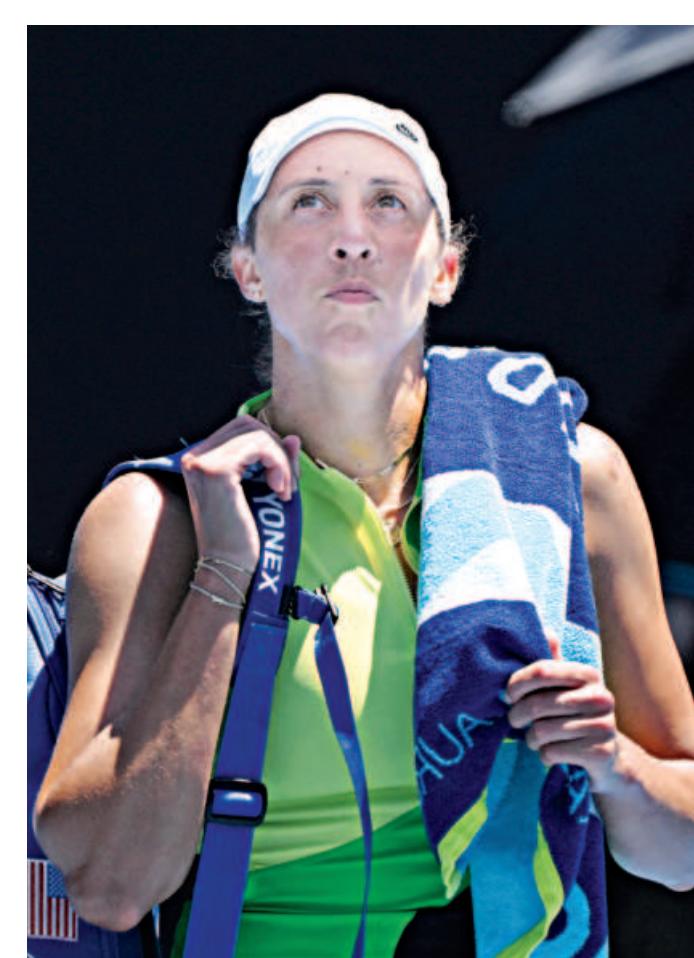


PHOTO: AFP/REUTERS