

'Should never go hardline from the start'

Known as one of the key architects behind Bangladesh's early rise in international cricket and cricket diplomacy, **Syed Ashraful Huq** is deeply pained by the prospect of Bangladesh missing out on the upcoming ICC T20 World Cup, set to be held in India and Sri Lanka from February 7. The former Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) general secretary and ex-chief executive officer of the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) has left an indelible mark wherever he has worked during his storied career as a cricket administrator. With Bangladesh now on the brink of facing an exit from the T20 World Cup due to stalled negotiations with the ICC, Ashraful spoke to *The Daily Star's* **Samsul Arefin Khan** over the phone from Bangkok, Thailand, on Thursday, sharing his concerns and insights. Excerpts from the interview are as follows:

DS: How do you see the events that unfolded in the last few weeks?

SAH: The whole thing has been mishandled. Sports and politics should never be mixed. I feel that we have failed to understand the difference between a domestic tournament and a World Cup.

DS: Your take on how things have been handled.

SAH: The strategy was wrong. You should never go hardline from the start. Everything should have a window for compromise and a dialogue with the opposition. In the '80s, there was a chance of an India-Pakistan war at any time. General Zia-ul-Haq [former Pakistan president] went to watch a Test match in Jaipur to diffuse everything. After the Kargil conflict in 2004, the full Indian team went to Pakistan. At that time, Atal Bihari Vajpayee told the team before leaving for Lahore from Delhi that winning or losing wasn't the most important thing; the important thing was winning the hearts of the people of Pakistan.

In 2008, during the terrorist attacks, I was in a key position as the CEO of the ACC. Later, we reasoned with Indian PM Manmohan Singh and Shashank Manohar, president of the BCCI. We



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Youth and Sports Adviser Asif Nazrul, alongside Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Aminul Islam Bulbul, addressed the media yesterday following a meeting with national team cricketers, including those named in the squad for the upcoming T20 World Cup, at a hotel in the capital. This marked the first time the players were involved in any form of discussion since the board decided earlier this month not to send the national team to play the T20 World Cup in India due to security reasons. While the sports adviser reaffirmed the stance of not sending the team to India for the marquee event, the overall mood could be gauged from T20I skipper Litton Das's reaction, as he said, "Don't have anything to say," while leaving the hotel.

SAH: First of all, going on a hardline stance was our mistake. Why take a hardline in sports? We should follow the process. During the whole process, we were in contact with the ICC because they are the owners of this thing. The ICC has done a security assessment and if the ICC says the security situation is alright – since it is their tournament – we have to accept it. If our government doesn't accept it, diplomatic channels are always open. Our board president could have easily gone and asked the Indian board if our security was guaranteed. Did he ask him or whether our government has asked the Indian government whether they can give us protection from the threats? We reacted based on what extreme right-wing groups like the RSS or Shiv Sena were saying.

DS: How do you see the BCB vs ICC stand-off?

SAH: We already signed a Participation Agreement [for the World Cup]. We are bound to follow their [ICC's] words. If we don't follow their words, our government should have asked the Indian government through diplomatic channels. It should

not be openly asked by writing to them. Our board could have also asked the Indian board whether it is okay or not [for Bangladesh to travel to India].

DS: Could there be fines, penalties, or anything else imposed on BCB?

SAH: It's possible. Personally, I think missing a World Cup is a huge loss. Our assets are our cricketers. Players like Litton or Mustafizur work so hard for the glory of playing in a World Cup.

DS: How would you have tackled the situation?

SAH: First, I would recognise my obligation to the ICC because of the signed agreement. If I didn't accept their security assessment, I would use diplomatic channels to ask the Indian government for assurance. For a win-win situation, I would have argued: "If Mustafizur is safe to play in the World Cup in India, why is he not safe for the IPL?" They would have then said yes, and then it would be a win-win situation for both.

DS: Should the BCB have communicated with the other boards?

SAH: The board should have talked and

fixed things earlier, so the government's decision wouldn't have to be that way. They should have spoken with the Indian board and the ICC. If they couldn't speak directly, they could have used someone like [Aminul Islam] Bulbul to help fix things. Bulbul and Roger Binny, the former BCCI president, worked together at the ACC. He could have a discussion regarding the Mustafizur issue. If Bulbul couldn't speak directly, Roger could have talked for him in this matter as well.

DS: How do you see Bulbul as an administrator?

SAH: I have a lot of respect for Bulbul because I was his colleague for 12-15 years at the ACC. Bulbul is a world-class coach educator and world-class programme conductor, but he hardly has any experience as an administrator.

DS: Various media reports claim that Pakistan also might not play if we don't play. Does their solidarity help us?

SAH: Pakistan will 100% play. We shouldn't find any contentment or satisfaction thinking Pakistan is with us.

told them that if this situation persists between the two countries, things will never improve. They both agreed and came to play the Asia Cup in 2010. These things require discussion. Just saying from here that "I won't go" doesn't work.

DS: How do you see the fact that the players were involved in a discussion only yesterday?

SAH: The board should have talked and

BPL glory up for grabs

SPORTS REPORTER

Chattogram Royals enter the final of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) T20 with a slight advantage over Rajshahi Warriors, as the tournament prepares to crown a new champion in Mirpur today.

The very participation of Chattogram was in doubt earlier, after the team's owners sought to hand it over to the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB). However, following BCB's takeover, Chattogram staged a remarkable turnaround, securing a place in the final with a victory in the first qualifier.



The title-decider now pits Chattogram, primarily built off local talents, against Rajshahi's local and foreign prowess. Chattogram mentor Habibul Bashar had said that after BCB took over operations, the appointments of fresh coaching staff and

personnel helped the team galvanise.

Young captain Mahedi Hasan rose to the occasion, having a significant impact with both bat and ball this tournament. Shoriful Islam enters the final as the leading wicket-taker with 11 wickets.

"The management and the senior players have handled things well, especially in terms of motivation and mental preparation. That's why everyone has been able to play good cricket," Mahedi said during his press conference yesterday.

With 15 wickets, Mahedi enters the final as a key factor as an all-rounder, apart from his captaincy role, and reiterated they want to win. "Since we have reached the final, why wouldn't we dream of winning the title?" he said.

He also heaped praise on Rajshahi, but having won two of the three matches they played against Chattogram, Mahedi felt they studied their opponents well. "I liked Rajshahi the best among the teams this year... but we have studied them well."

At the other end of the spectrum, Rajshahi had found solidity and also key performances when it mattered. Najmul Hossain Shanto himself has been one of the top run-scorers in the tournament alongside veteran Mashfiqur Rahim. They also added Jimmy Neesham and Kane Williamson late on, the Kiwi duo already having an effect against Sylhet Titans in the second qualifier.

Shanto was keen on sticking to plans, having showcased level-headed captaincy in his first stint as a skipper in the BPL. "We're very happy, but we still have to play good cricket... A final is a big occasion, of course, but we need to stay calm and clear-headed," he said.



Dominik Szoboszlai's clever free-kick helped Liverpool on their way to a convincing 3-0 win over Marseille in the Champions League on Wednesday, extending their unbeaten run to 13 matches in all competitions and moving them a step closer to direct qualification for the last 16. Liverpool could clinch a last-16 place by beating Qarabag next week. Meanwhile, Harry Kane's double earned Bayern Munich a 2-0 victory over Union Saint-Gilloise, securing a place in the last 16 for the German giants. Bayern joined table-toppers Arsenal in guaranteeing a top-eight finish with a game to spare and, therefore, a last-16 spot.



SONY SPORTS 2,5 Australian Open Live from 6:00 pm STAR SPORTS 2 Big Bash League Challenger Hobart Hurricanes vs Sydney Sixers Live from 1:30 pm

Rajshahi Live from 2:15 pm STAR SPORTS SELECT HD2 ICC U19 WC Bangladesh vs USA Live from 1:30 pm



TIGRESSSES STORM INTO SUPER SIX

Sanjida Akter Meghla led Bangladesh's bowling with 4 for 14, while Rabeya Khan and Fahima Khatun took three wickets each as Bangladesh beat Namibia by 80 runs in the ICC Women's T20 World Cup Global Qualifier 2026 on Thursday in Nepal. Batting first, Bangladesh made 144 before bowling Namibia out for 64. The win marked Bangladesh's third straight victory, sealing their place in the Super Six and moving them closer to qualification for the ICC Women's T20 World Cup in England in June. They now need a top-four finish in the Super Six to qualify.

PHOTO: ICC

U19s face USA in must-win clash

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh face a must-win encounter against the USA in their final Group B match of the ICC U19 World Cup in Harare today. With just one point from two games, Bangladesh must beat the USA to secure a place in the Super Six but with rain playing a big part in the tournament, a washout would see both Bangladesh and USA on two points but the former would advance owing to a superior net run-rate. Three teams from each group progress to the Super Six, where points, wins and net run-rate earned against fellow qualifiers are carried forward. As things stand, even a win would see Bangladesh carry only one point forward.

Williamson on evolution, heartbreak and hope

New Zealand batter Kane Williamson reflected on key moments of his career and the evolving nature of modern cricket during a media interaction on Thursday, a day after joining Rajshahi Warriors in the Bangladesh Premier League. Williamson recalled the 2019 ODI World Cup final as a remarkable contest, saying the team remained proud of their approach despite the outcome and focused on what was within its control. He described winning the ICC Test Championship soon after as a special achievement against a world-class India side. Williamson also spoke about adapting batting techniques across formats, the passion for cricket in Bangladesh, and New Zealand's prospects in the upcoming T20 World Cup. He is set to feature in the BPL final against Chattogram Royals on Friday.

** Read the full interview on *The Daily Star's* website