

ICC's 'unfair' schedule hits Bangladesh U-19s

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

Bangladesh's early exit from the ICC U-19 World Cup was sealed after a lacklustre performance against England in their opening Super Sixes fixture on Monday. While inconsistent performance and miscalculations during rain-affected fixtures played a major role, officials have also criticised the team's heavy travel schedule, which they deemed as "unfair".

"More than the approach, I think our calculations were lacking [against England and India]. But this [travel schedule] is something I want to highlight, even if people think I'm making excuses," game development coordinator Habibul Bashar told The Daily Star yesterday.

The Junior Tigers left for Zimbabwe on January 6 for the 16th edition of the tournament and were required to play their two warm-up matches at different venues – Masvingo and Harare – against Pakistan and Scotland on January 10 and 13 respectively. Masvingo is nearly a four-hour drive from Harare, meaning the team had to travel back and forth within a short span.

This year, the ICC prohibited domestic



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air travel during the tournament, requiring teams, officials, and staff to move by bus.

The long journeys did not end there. Bangladesh travelled from Harare to Bulawayo – a nearly nine-hour bus ride during monsoon season – for their opening Group B matches on January 17 and 20. Considering the importance of the fixtures, the BCB arranged and funded an internal flight on their own for the matches against India and New Zealand.

"To avoid the boys getting too tired before the India match, the BCB actually paid for an internal flight out of its own pocket because the bus journey was too long and direct flights were scarce,"

Bashar informed.

After those games, Bangladesh returned to Harare by bus for their match against the USA on January 23 before heading back to Bulawayo again by bus for the Super Six clash against England on January 26. Following that match, the team once again travelled to Harare to prepare for their final game against hosts Zimbabwe on January 31.

It is understood that both players and team management repeatedly expressed frustration over the hectic schedule. Even head coach Naveed Nawaz appeared worn down by the constant travel. When contacted on Tuesday while the team was en route from Bulawayo to Harare, he replied briefly: "Nine hours in the bus."

India, meanwhile, stayed in Bulawayo for all their matches and practice games. Similarly, several major teams had far lighter travel burdens.

Australia played all their warm-up and group matches in Windhoek, Namibia, travelling to Harare only for their final Super Six fixture against the West Indies. England played their warm-ups in Harare and Bulawayo but had all their group

matches in Harare, with a four-day gap before their Super Six games in Bulawayo.

Pakistan also played their group matches and opening Super Six fixture in Harare and will only travel to Bulawayo for their final Super Six match against India.

"The schedule was very unfair to us," Bashar said. "During the initial schedule, we were supposed to play two of our warm-up matches in Masvingo and travel to Bulawayo, which is a four-hour drive, for our opening two group-stages matches. Later, they [ICC] suddenly changed the schedule, and it meant we had to play two of our warm-up games at different venues, travelling back and forth."

"We notified them [of the travel burden] before the tournament started. We asked them to move our practice games to avoid the back-and-forth travel, but they didn't listen. Once the tournament starts, you can't really change these things."

As Bashar's account highlights, the contrast between Bangladesh's burden and the lighter schedules of other teams draws attention to long-standing concerns over tournament planning – a debate the ICC may now find impossible to ignore.

MIXING SPORTS AND POLITICS | WHAT THEY SAID

What I do know is that it's sad, and that it should never get to a point where teams have to withdraw themselves from tournaments. I really feel that it's sad and a bad look, and a bad take on our sport. And it should never get to this. Whoever is in control, whoever can make the decisions, just sort it out. I have spoken enough about it in the past – I hate it when politics get so involved in cricket that it gets to a point like this. Really, really sad.

South Africa great AB de Villiers.

Politics is our enemy, and it's not just harming cricket but humanity as a whole. It's a loss for the sport and its players. Cricket is meant to unite nations, not drive them apart.

Legendary Pakistan spinner Saqlain Mushtaq.

In a sport driven by global audiences, sidelining Bangladesh's legitimate security concerns raises serious questions about consistency and governance.

Former Pakistan cricketer Mohammad Yousuf.

CLUB	MP	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Arsenal Q	7	7	0	0	18	21
Bayern Q	7	6	0	1	13	18
Real Madrid	7	5	0	2	11	15
Liverpool	7	5	0	2	6	15
Tottenham	7	4	2	1	8	14
PSG	7	4	1	2	10	13
Newcastle	7	4	1	2	10	13
Chelsea	7	4	1	2	6	13
Barcelona	7	4	1	2	5	13
Sporting	7	4	1	2	5	13
Man City	7	4	1	2	4	13
Atlético Madrid	7	4	1	2	3	13
Atalanta	7	4	1	2	1	13
Inter	7	4	0	3	6	12
Juventus	7	3	3	1	4	12
Dortmund	7	3	2	2	4	11
Galatasaray	7	3	1	3	0	10
Qarabag FK	7	3	1	3	-2	10
Marseille	7	3	0	4	0	9
Leverkusen	7	2	3	2	-4	9
Monaco	7	2	3	2	-6	9
PSV	7	2	2	3	1	8
Athletic Club	7	2	2	3	-4	8
Olympiacos	7	2	2	3	-5	8
Napoli	7	2	2	3	-5	8
Copenhagen	7	2	2	3	-6	8
Club Brugge	7	2	1	4	-5	7
Bodo/Glimt	7	1	3	3	-2	6
Benfica	7	2	0	5	-4	6
Pafos	7	1	3	3	-6	6
Union Saint-Gilloise	7	2	0	5	-10	6
Ajax	7	2	0	5	-12	6
Eintracht Frankfurt	7	1	1	5	-9	4
Slavia Praha	7	0	3	4	-11	3
Villarreal	7	0	1	6	-10	1
Kairat	7	0	1	6	-14	1

Note: Top eight qualify directly for last 16; teams from ninth to 24th enter a play-off round to contest the remaining last-16 berths; bottom 12 teams will be eliminated.



UCL'S DECISIVE NIGHT: Chelsea's Cole Palmer enjoys a training session as a dramatic final day of the Champions League league phase beckons, with all 30 teams from Real Madrid in third to Ajax in 32nd still in contention for the play-off round. As it stands, only Real Madrid, Liverpool and Tottenham know that a win will secure direct qualification to the last 16. Just behind them, PSG, Newcastle, Chelsea, Barcelona, Sporting CP, Manchester City, Atlético Madrid and Atalanta are level on 13 points, one behind Spurs, with victory giving them a strong chance of a top-eight finish and automatic qualification. However, goal difference could yet be decisive, and even a win on matchday eight may not be enough. Chelsea travel to Napoli, while Barcelona host Copenhagen and Manchester City welcome Galatasaray in more favourable fixtures.

PHOTO: CHELSEA

Tigresses wary of Thailand on T20 WC road

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will look to move a step closer to the ICC Women's T20 World Cup when they take on Thailand in their opening Super Six match of the Qualifiers in Kathmandu today.

The Tigresses stormed into the Super Six unbeaten, winning all four group matches and carrying four crucial points forward.

A win for Bangladesh at Mulpani Cricket Ground, combined with a Netherlands victory over the USA in the day's other match, would see both Bangladesh and Netherlands (four points) secure qualification for the main event in England and Wales in June. Four teams will advance from the Super Six stage.

Bangladesh began with a 21-run win over the USA before defeating Papua New Guinea and Namibia by 30 and 80 runs respectively. They then edged Ireland by nine runs in a high-voltage clash to top Group A.

Sharmin Akhter Supta has been in fine form, leading Bangladesh's batting charts with 156 runs in four innings – the second-highest in the tournament – while Rabeya Khan has taken seven wickets, joint fourth among the top bowlers.

Captain Nigar Sultana Joty credited recent domestic T20 competitions for the team's consistent batting form. "Our batters have been in great touch since the NCL and BCL. Here too, we've consistently scored 140-plus," she said.

Despite a 7-0 record against Thailand in T20s, Joty warned against complacency. "Every team is competitive, and every point matters. We're not taking anyone lightly."



Minnows seize transfer window to tighten BFL race

SPORTS REPORTER

With the mid-term transfer window of the Bangladesh Football League (BFL) set to close on January 31, the league's smaller outfits are moving decisively to reshape the title race and relegation battles, capitalising on a rare opening created by restrictions on the country's traditional powerhouses.

Abahani, Mohammedan, and joint table toppers Bashundhara Kings are currently unable to register new players due to a FIFA ruling related to unpaid wages. That situation has left the door ajar for the rest of the league, and the minnows appear keen to step through it.

At the end of the first phase, Kings sit joint top of the 10-team table with 18 points from nine matches alongside Fortis FC, while Rahmatganj are close behind on 15 points. Abahani, meanwhile, are fifth with 13 points, and defending champions Mohammedan are sixth with just 10 points.

As the second phase is expected to begin after the February 12 national elections, clubs outside the big three have turned the mid-season window into a strategic weapon, reinforcing their squads with foreign and regional players in a bid to close the gap at the

top and escape the relegation zone.

Footballers from South Asia have dominated the transfer activity, with three Bhutan national team players and two Pakistan national team players already confirmed to make their BFL debuts in the second phase. Several clubs have also brought in players from African nations, alongside additions from Brazil and Russia.



Fortis FC have confirmed the signings of Bhutanese left wing-back Dawa Tshering and local goalkeeper Nayeem Islam, while continuing their search for a striker. Manager Rashedul Islam said the club was focused on maintaining balance rather than wholesale changes.

"We are going to add value instead of numbers because we want to keep the team bonding, combination, and understanding intact," said Islam.

Second-placed Rahmatganj managed to secure Ghanaian forward

Earnest Boateng, a familiar face at the Old Dhaka club, despite financial limitations preventing further reinforcements. Coach Kamal Babu believes the addition could help them "fight for the top two positions" after the side played the first phase without a genuine striker.

Bangladesh Police FC, who sit just behind the leading pack, have signed Bhutanese player Sherub Dorji along with two locals and are close to adding an African forward, as their coach Asifuzzaman aims to see "ourselves on the top of the table."

At the other end of the table, promoted sides PWD and Arambagh have also been active. PWD brought in a Bhutanese defender, two Pakistani players – goalkeeper Usman Ali and Ali Uzair – three foreigners from Brazil, Ghana, and Russia, and five U-19 footballers, including Bangladesh U-19 captain Nazmul Huda Faisal. Arambagh, meanwhile, added a Ghanaian forward and four experienced local players in their bid to escape the relegation zone.

With the giants unable to strengthen and the rest reinforcing aggressively, the second phase of the BFL is shaping up to be an exciting one.

Historic first in open era

STAR SPORTS DESK

The 2026 Australian Open has written a unique piece of already tennis history. For the first time in the Open Era, which began in 1968, the top six seeds in both the men's and women's singles have progressed to the last eight of a Grand Slam. It is a statistical first in 58 years of top-level tennis.

While the women's draw last achieved this feat in the 1998 US Open, and the men did so as recently as the 2024 Australian Open, this marks the first occasion both draws have mirrored each other so perfectly at the same major.

The trade-off has been a noticeable lack of early-round drama. Upsets were scarce, straight-sets victories common, and the opening stages unfolded without the usual Grand Slam chaos.

What the tournament has delivered instead is a loaded quarter-final line-up – a heavyweight clash of the sport's elite, promising quality over surprise as the Australian Open moves into its decisive phase.



Carlos Alcaraz swept into the Australian Open semifinals for the first time on Tuesday and a clash with Alexander Zverev to take a step closer to tennis history. The Spanish world number one silenced a partisan Melbourne crowd in brushing aside outclassed home hope Alex de Minaur 7-5, 6-2, 6-1 at Rod Laver Arena. The 22-year-old Alcaraz is yet to drop a set as he arrws in a maiden Australian Open crown. "I'm just really happy how I'm playing every match, each round my level is increasing," he said.

PHOTO: AFP