

Non-payment woes return to BPL

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The Bangladesh Premier League's (BPL's) chronic non-payment issue has re-emerged after the end of the 12th edition with its governing council already having sent a letter to all franchises to clear all outstanding dues.

The letter was sent on January 27, instructing all teams to complete payments by the next 15 days, an official informed.

Unlike the previous season, players' non-payment issue did not come under the spotlight during the 12th edition, which came to a close on January 23.

It was overshadowed by other issues like the uncertainty over Bangladesh's T20 World Cup campaign, a players' boycott which held up the league for over a day, and the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) having to take over Chattogram Royals after its owners left the franchise a day before the tournament began.

However, a week after the tournament's conclusion, some players are expressing frustrations over not being paid.

One Noakhali Express player informed on Thursday that the franchise has paid players 25 percent of the total dues till now. "You can ask the other players too. Our cheques bounced on January 20, and it happened to all the players," he informed The Daily Star, requesting anonymity.

The information was corroborated by other players. "BCB asked us about the payments and we are expecting



the payments will be made soon," said the Noakhali player, who is owed over Tk 10 lakh from the franchise.

Dhaka Capitals players had confirmed a week ago that they received 25 percent of their payments during the tournament and a small amount was disbursed to the players' accounts afterwards. The franchise had said last week that they would clear all dues during the ongoing week.

Champions Rajshahi Warriors claim to have cleared all payments, which was confirmed by the board and some players. There appears to be no issues with Rangpur Riders' payments, one Sylhet Titans player said fifty percent of his payment was made, and Chattogram players will be paid by the board.

BPL member secretary Iftekhar Rahman Mithu accepted that some franchises are behind on their payment but hinted that in the case of non-payment, the board would utilise the bank guarantees and franchise fee to clear all dues.

"Altogether, Noakhali have around Tk 1.45 crore in outstanding payments. We have Tk 2 crore [as franchise fee] from them. Dhaka have provided us with a Tk 5 crore bank guarantee. Cheques have bounced but we have the funds for their payments with us," he said.

"We issued a letter on the 27th that in 15 days from then, the franchises will have to complete all payment and give us a list which would include the names of all team management, foreign and local players. We will scrutinise the list by calling each and every one," he added.



NO HANDSHAKE

Belarusian world No. 1 Aryna Sabalenka crushed Ukraine's Elina Svitolina 6-2, 6-3 in a politically charged Australian Open semifinal yesterday and will face Elena Rybakina, who defeated Jessica Pegula in straight sets, for a third Melbourne title on Saturday. There was no handshake after the match, following an announcement at Rod Laver Arena asking fans to "respect" the decision. Like other Ukrainian players, Svitolina avoids handshakes with opponents from Russia or Belarus due to the war, and the two also kept their distance during pre-match formalities and photos.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Melbourne set for blockbuster semifinals



AGENCIES

Novak Djokovic knows better than anyone the mountain he must climb to capture a record 25th Grand Slam title, but the Serbian legend is far from surrendering.

The 38-year-old cruised into the Australian Open semifinals after Lorenzo Musetti retired while trailing 6-4, 6-3, 1-3, following an earlier walkover against Jakub Mensik.

His reward is a blockbuster clash with world number two

and defending champion Jannik Sinner, who has beaten Djokovic in their last five meetings. Djokovic will need to reverse that trend to reach his 11th Australian Open final, where either Carlos Alcaraz or Alexander Zverev awaits.

Despite heavy losses to Sinner at the French Open and Wimbledon last year, Djokovic remains defiant, insisting he will "fight until the last shot" as he chases history. The ten-time Melbourne champion is seeking his first major since

the 2023 US Open, but the rise of Sinner and Alcaraz has made the task tougher.

Sinner, however, was full of respect, calling Djokovic an inspiration and praising his professionalism and experience.

Meanwhile, Alcaraz is chasing a career Grand Slam at just 22 and faces Zverev, who is pain-free and playing aggressive tennis. With two thrilling semi-finals ahead, Melbourne is set for a dramatic showdown.

'Future of cricket is based on aggression'

Despite playing more than 30 matches in the lead-up to the ICC Under-19 World Cup, Bangladesh failed to reach the semifinals. Ahead of their final Super Sixes match against hosts Zimbabwe tomorrow, Bangladesh Under-19 head coach Naveed Nawaz spoke to The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan about the team's campaign, lessons learned, and other issues. Excerpts follow:

The Daily Star (DS): What are your thoughts on the World Cup journey?

Naveed Nawaz (NN): Both of our practice matches were affected by rain, which made things very difficult. With DLS coming into play against India, we needed to score over seven runs an over. The wicket got wet, balls stayed low, and unfortunately, we couldn't keep up. The New Zealand game was washed out, and we batted poorly in our last game against England.

DS: Did losing to India after dominating most of that game affect the team mentally?

NN: More than being mentally down, I think the boys didn't play enough cricket from the Asia Cup onwards, as many matches were rain-affected. That disrupted momentum and confidence.

DS: Why does Bangladesh often struggle in pressure situations?

NN: We try to address that by playing a lot of cricket at the Under-19 level. But if you look at India, their players play a massive volume of cricket. I read about a school cricketer in India who scored 29,000 runs and 29 centuries. Mental strength and the ability to handle pressure only improve by playing more and more cricket.

DS: What is your take on the heavy travel schedule during tournaments?

NN: We travelled more than 2,000 kilometres. After arriving in Harare, we travelled 600 kilometres to play two practice matches. For our first game against India, we had to travel another 450 kilometres [BCB arranged a flight at their own cost later]. When we saw the schedule, we wrote to the ICC to object, but there was no change. Travel fatigue is definitely an issue in a tournament like this.

DS: Do we need to change approach in this fast-evolving game?

NN: We have players like Zawad Abrar, who is an aggressive player. The future of cricket is based on aggression. It's not fair to say we don't have that capability, but we struggled with patience and execution in the middle.

DS: How do you see your future as your contract ends after this World Cup?

NN: I haven't had any discussions with the BCB yet. Bangladesh produces a lot of talent every year, which is surprising given that the junior system isn't as strong as India or Sri Lanka. The BCB's development department has done significant work at district and divisional levels, and working with such players remains my priority.



Keeper who could not be kept out



Qualified Directly To Last 16: Arsenal, Bayern Munich, Liverpool, Tottenham, Barcelona, Chelsea, Sporting Lisbon, Manchester City

Playoff Places: Real Madrid, Inter Milan, PSG, Newcastle, Juventus, Atletico Madrid, Atalanta, Bayer Leverkusen, Borussia Dortmund, Olympiacos, Club Brugge, Galatasaray, AS Monaco, Qarabag, Bodo/Glimt, Benfica



PHOTO: AFP

Sixty-one goals, a table resembling a football stock market that never stood still, and drama at every turn – capped by a goalkeeper rising for a final, telling touch to keep his team alive. That was the final day of the Champions League league phase, with 18 fixtures kicking off simultaneously across Europe.

When Benfica coach Jose Mourinho signalled goalkeeper Anatoliy Trubin to go up for a free-kick deep into stoppage time, thousands of kilometres away at the

Etihad Stadium, Manchester City coach Pep Guardiola questioned: "Why you go?" Guardiola, watching the Real Madrid vs Benfica match with his entire squad in the dressing room, was unaware that his old rival Mourinho needed one more goal to secure Benfica's place in the playoffs. He only knew that a late Real Madrid goal would push City out of the top eight and end their hopes of direct qualification to the last 16.

Instead, Benfica emerged with a 4-2

win, the decisive goal coming from Trubin himself. The goalkeeper's 98th-minute header also earned him a congratulatory hug from his opposite number, Madrid keeper Thibaut Courtois.

Trubin's goal finally settled the Champions League standings, with Real Madrid dropping from third to ninth and forced into the playoffs. Benfica, meanwhile, edged out Marseille on goal difference to claim the final qualification spot and keep their campaign alive.

SHORT CORNER

Pakistan beat Australia in T20Is after 7 years

Pakistan sealed a 22-run victory over Australia yesterday in the first of the three-match T20I series, being played as a build-up to next month's T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka. Pakistan restricted Australia to 146 for eight, after posting 168 for eight at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore. Pakistan lost their previous seven T20Is with Australia, with their last victory coming in in Dubai 2018.

English power surge in Champions League

Premier League clubs have flexed their muscle across Europe, with five English sides finishing in the top eight of the Champions League group phase. Arsenal, Liverpool, Tottenham, Manchester City, Newcastle and Chelsea all recorded higher win percentages in Europe than in this season's Premier League.

Pakistan booked to fly out for T20 WC: report

Despite talks of Pakistan boycotting the upcoming T20 World Cup, set to be held in Sri Lanka and India from February 7 to March 8, reports have emerged that the team has already booked flights to Colombo for the marquee event. "The Pakistan team is booked with the Australian team to fly to Colombo via an Air Lanka flight from Lahore," sources were quoted as saying by Telecom Asia Sport.

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