



Offering an early glimpse of the 10th edition of the T20 World Cup, set to begin tomorrow in India and Sri Lanka, captains of the 20 participating teams gathered for a Captains' Carnival held simultaneously in Mumbai and Colombo yesterday. However, the picture -- a collage of images from the two events released by the International Cricket Council (ICC) -- may sting cricket-crazy fans in Bangladesh, as Tigers T20 skipper Litton Das would have been standing in place of Scotland captain Richie Berrington. Scotland replaced Bangladesh at the marquee event after the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) decided not to send the team to India due to security concerns, while the ICC declined their request to relocate the matches outside India.

PHOTO: ICC

T20 World Cup Corner

FIVE BATTERS TO WATCH

The evolution of strategy in T20 cricket has transformed power-hitting and run-chase tactics, and the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026 promises to showcase the game's latest trends. Co-hosts and defending champions India are expected to lead the charge, with stars like Abhishek Sharma, the tournament's top-ranked T20I batter, poised to dominate Powerplays. South Africa's prodigy Dewald Brevis, England's seasoned Jos Buttler, West Indies' composed Shai Hope, and Pakistan's versatile Salman Ali Agha add firepower and experience. With each bringing unique strengths, these five batters are set to define the tournament, making every innings a spectacle.



FEARLESS TALENT: FIVE YOUNG PLAYERS TO WATCH

The T20 World Cup kicks off Saturday in India and Sri Lanka, offering young stars a global stage. Keep an eye on five exciting talents: Australia's all-rounder Cooper Connolly, England's dynamic Jacob Bethell, South Africa's teenage pacer Kwen Maphaka, India's fearless left-hander Tilak Varma, and Afghanistan's spin sensation Noor Ahmad. Each has already impressed with standout performances and carries the potential to shine in this month-long, 20-team tournament, promising thrilling cricket and emerging heroes for fans to follow.

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Not playing, but Bangladesh still in discussion

AGENCIES

The T20 World Cup 2026 is all set to begin tomorrow. Yet, instead of discussions about on-field affairs, the cricketing world has continued to buzz with politics, protest and uncertainty.

Bangladesh, though no longer part of the tournament, has stood at the centre of every conversation. Their removal from the competition sent shockwaves through the cricketing fraternity, triggering reactions that extended far beyond the boundary ropes. What was meant to be a celebration of cricket has turned into a debate over principle, protest and power.

The loudest storm, however, has revolved around India and Pakistan. Their much-anticipated clash on February 15 was thrown into doubt after Pakistan announced it would boycott the match. On Thursday, India captain Suryakumar Yadav addressed the issue directly, standing calm but firm before the media at Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium.

"We haven't said no to playing them," he said. "They are the ones who have said no. Our flights are booked, and we are going to Colombo."

India has made it clear they will turn up at the stadium, ready to take the field, even if Pakistan chooses not to appear. The possibility of a forfeit

win has only added to the tension surrounding the tournament's opening phase.

Pakistan captain Salman Agha, speaking from Colombo, struck a cautious tone. He explained that the decision was not solely in the team's hands. "If we meet India in the semifinal or final, we will go back to the government and act on their advice," he said, leaving the door slightly open for a potential showdown later in the tournament.

At the heart of the matter lies Bangladesh's exclusion. The Bangladesh team refused to travel to India, citing security concerns. The International Cricket Council responded by removing them from Group C and replacing them with Scotland. That decision triggered a wave of solidarity and backlash across the cricketing world.

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif publicly confirmed on Wednesday that his country's boycott of the India match was a protest against Bangladesh's removal. Addressing his federal cabinet, he declared: "We have taken a very clear stand... we should completely stand by Bangladesh, and I think this is a very appropriate decision."

It was the first official acknowledgment from Pakistan's government on the matter, giving political weight to what many had

hoped would remain a sporting issue.

Youth and Sports Adviser Asif Nazrul responded with gratitude. "Thank you, Pakistan," he wrote on his official Facebook page.

Former cricketers also weighed in. Nasser Hussain, the former England captain turned commentator, voiced his support for Bangladesh's stance and praised Pakistan's show of solidarity.

"I actually quite like Bangladesh sticking to their guns. They stood up for their player, the Fizz [Mustafizur Rahman]. And I also quite like Pakistan sticking up for Bangladesh."

Brett Lee, Australia's former fast-bowling spearhead, took a different tone, urging cricket to rise above politics. "Let's get the politics out of it," he said on a podcast. "I really hope the match happens. The whole world watches when India and Pakistan play one another."

And that is the central dilemma: the world's most electrifying cricket rivalry is on hold, caught between diplomacy and sport. Fans, broadcasters and players alike feel the weight of what is being lost.

As the clock ticks toward the tournament's opening ball, a single question lingers in the air: will the action on the field finally bring relief after weeks of political posturing?

Only time will tell if cricket gets to reclaim the spotlight.



Bangladesh leg-spinner Rishad Hossain carried his Big Bash League form into the Odommo Bangladesh T20 Cup as he starred in Dhumketu XI's nine-wicket win over Duronto XI in the tournament opener at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium yesterday. Fresh from finishing as Hobart Hurricanes' leading wicket-taker with 15 scalps in the BBL, Rishad returned figures of 3-21 from four overs to bowl Duronto out for 143 in 19.5 overs, a target that Dhumketu chased down comfortably in 16.1 overs.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

City set up League Cup final clash with Arsenal

Manchester City booked a League Cup final date with Arsenal at Wembley on March 22 after ending holders Newcastle's reign with a 3-1 win on Wednesday. Already 2-0 up from the first leg, Pep Guardiola's side completed the job in ruthless fashion at the Etihad Stadium as Omar Marmoush struck twice in the first half before Tijjani Reijnders sealed the tie. Anthony Elanga pulled one back after the break but City's 5-1 aggregate victory sent them back to the League Cup showpiece for the first time since 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Named after Mashrafe, carving his own path

Inspired by Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's brilliant four-wicket haul against India at the 2007 ICC World Cup, a baby from Paba upazila in Rajshahi was named after the celebrated fast bowler. Years later, that boy chose football over cricket. Cut to present: now a Grade 12 student, **Masrafi Islam** lit up the recently concluded Senior Division Football League by finishing as the top scorer. In an interview, the Mohakhali Ekadosh forward spoke to **The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman** about his breakthrough season, ambitions and journey so far. Excerpts follow:

The Daily Star (DS): Mohakhali Ekadosh finished runners-up on goal difference, and you scored 18 of the team's 42 goals. Does scoring come naturally to you?

Masrafi Islam (MI): I actually played only 13 of the 16 matches due to injury. I managed three hat-tricks -- against Arambagh Football Academy, T&T Club Motijheel and Nababpur Krira Chakra -- and scored in eight of the 13 matches I played. You could say, scoring goals has always been a passion... During matches, I try to imagine myself playing on my village ground, which helps me stay relaxed and makes scoring feel easier.

DS: How did your football journey begin?



MI: My parents were initially against me playing football, but they changed their minds after I helped my school reach the district stage of the Bangabandhu Primary School Gold Cup from the upazila level, scoring six or seven goals and being named the best upazila footballer. Later, I joined Kishore Football Academy in Rajshahi under coach Jade bhai. Before moving to Dhaka football in 2025, I played in the Third Division League in Rajshahi, scoring three goals in three matches. I also represented Badda Jagorani Sangsad in last season's Senior Division League, which was abandoned after five matches due to the July uprising.

DS: You were named after Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. How did that come about?

MI: I was born just a few days before Bangladesh played India in the 2007 World Cup. My maternal uncle named me after Mashrafe, who, I heard, played brilliantly in that historic win. But football has always been my love. People often ask why I didn't choose cricket, and I tell them: one Mashrafe played cricket, another will play football.

DS: How competitive was the 17-team league, and what kind of support did you receive from your club?

MI: Four or five teams were in the title race, which shows how close it was. Mohakhali Ekadosh supported us well with food, accommodation and training facilities. The payment was modest, but I didn't need to spend anything extra because of the club's arrangements.

DS: What are your targets after this season?

MI: My ultimate dream is to play for the national team. For now, I'm hoping to get an opportunity in the Bangladesh Football League next season. If that doesn't happen, I'll aim for the Bangladesh Championship League. I'm continuing my training during the off-season to stay ready.

DS: You mentioned the national U-20 camp earlier. What happened there?

MI: I was expecting a call-up after my performance in the senior division, but it didn't come. Still, I'm not disappointed. I believe something better awaits me.

Lahore Qalandars rope in Fizz

AGENCIES

Lahore Qalandars have announced the signing of Bangladesh pacer Mustafizur Rahman as a direct signing for the 11th season of the Pakistan Super League (PSL).

Mustafizur, who previously represented the franchise in 2016 and 2018, will once again wear the Qalandars' colours. The deal was finalised at PKR 6.44 crore (BDT 2.81 crore approximately).

"Once a Qalandar, always a Qalandar. Mustafizur is not just a player; he's a brother, a key part of our family who never left," said Lahore Qalandars owner Sameen Rana. "We are thrilled to welcome him back to our dressing room. His talent, experience, and dedication will be invaluable as we aim to defend our title and make a statement in PSL 11."

With this signing, Lahore Qalandars are aiming to continue their strong legacy in the PSL as they look to defend their title and deliver another memorable season for their fans.

The recent controversy surrounding the ICC T20 World Cup stemmed from Mustafizur being dropped by IPL franchise Kolkata Knight Riders on January 3 on instructions from the Board of Control for Cricket in India.

That decision triggered a series of events that eventually led to Bangladesh being excluded from the marquee T20 event and Pakistan boycotting their group game against India on February 15 in support of Bangladesh.

