



PHOTO: BFF

# DAVID MEETS GOLIATH

## in Bangladesh's historic first

**SPORTS REPORTER**

Bangladesh women's football team are set to embark on a landmark chapter in their sporting history today. Making their debut at the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026, the tournament's 21st edition since its inception in 1975, the women in red and green face defending champions China at the 30,000 capacity Western Sydney Stadium in Australia.

The Group B fixture kicks off at 2:00 pm

(Bangladesh time) and will be broadcast live on T-Sports.

For a nation that only started its women's football journey on the international stage in 2010 – a year before the domestic league began – qualifying for Asia's top-flight competition has been a monumental achievement. While several tournament rivals happened to be World Cup regulars with deep professional pool of players, Bangladesh have rapidly ascended to the continental stage against the overwhelming odds.

Their opening fixture is a true "David versus Goliath" encounter, as Bangladesh head coach Peter Butler said at the pre-match press conference yesterday. China, nine-time champions, currently sit 95 places ahead of Bangladesh in the FIFA rankings.

While the gulf in experience is vast, the goal for Bangladesh is clear: deliver a resilient performance to build momentum for upcoming group stage matches against former champions and title aspirants North Korea and Uzbekistan.

Despite the daunting opposition and a squad where half the players average just 20 years of age, coach Butler is adamant that his side will not simply retreat into a defensive shell.

"This is a historic moment for Bangladesh," Butler told the media in Sydney. "While North Korea and Uzbekistan are strong, our immediate focus is China. We will have a game plan and play our way – win, lose, or draw. We are not the type of team to 'park the bus', regardless of the opponent."

Bangladesh captain Afeida Khandaker said, "It is actually a privilege for us to play against a champion team like China. However, we will not step back from the fight just because they are a strong team."

Afeida and company carry the expectations of a nation of 170 million, but the Bangladesh captain said her team are aware of the expectations but remain unfazed by the occasion. "We represent our country, but we are not carrying any pressure."

**"The people of Bangladesh can expect honest endeavor from us. We are an honest group; we might be small in stature, but the players have big hearts and want to do well for their country."**

Bangladesh coach Peter Butler



Debutants Bangladesh are ranked 112nd while China, defending champions and record nine-time winners of this continental trophy, are ranked 17th in the world.

China are undefeated across their last 11 group stage matches at the AFC Women's Asian Cup, conceding just a single goal across those fixtures.

Bangladesh have become the 23rd different team to be represented at the AFC Women's Asian Cup.

China have scored an average of 4.9 goals per game at the AFC Women's Asian Cup, the most of any team in tournament history.



**"Bangladesh are doing well with their style of play. You know, a team that will not have a lot of pressure on themselves will enjoy themselves. So, we're expecting a difficult game,"**

China coach Ante Milicic

# Saif turns page on T20 WC, eyes ODI WC

**SPORTS REPORTER**

Bangladesh batter Saif Hassan wants to move on from the disappointment of missing out on the ongoing ICC T20 World Cup and focus on the upcoming ODI assignments, with qualification for the next year's ICC ODI World Cup still on the line.

Saif is currently taking part in the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL) one-day tournament for Central Zone, who will face North Zone today in the final at Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium.

Saif and the national team players will then turn their attention to the three-match ODI series at home against Pakistan, beginning on March 11, which will kick off a busy period in 50-overs' cricket for the Tigers.

Bangladesh have 23 ODIs scheduled until March 31, 2027. To qualify directly for the 14-team World Cup, the Tigers must finish among the top eight Full Members in the ICC ODI rankings by that date. Full member hosts South Africa and Zimbabwe have already secured automatic qualification.

Saif, vice-captain of the T20I side, is still reeling from missing out on his maiden T20 World Cup after the Bangladesh team refused to travel to India over security concerns. But the 27-year-old claims he has now realigned his focus to the upcoming important assignments.

"Deep down, in our hearts, everyone is disappointed. There's no denying that.

But I think as professional cricketers, it's very important for us to move on," Saif told reporters yesterday in Mirpur after Central Zone's practice session was washed out by rain.



"Since we're now heading into ODI cricket and there's an ODI World Cup ahead, the sooner we prepare ourselves for it, the better it will be," he added.

After being out of the reckoning for a few years, Saif seemingly revived his international career with some impactful knocks in the Asia Cup T20 last year.

His performance in T20Is earned him an ODI debut and he made a mark in Bangladesh's last ODI assignment – a home series against West Indies in last

October – hitting a 72-ball 80 in the series-deciding third ODI to help Tigers seal the series 2-1.

"If you look at the last year or year and a half, I didn't really get many opportunities to play ODIs. We did play a few, but those were in between T20Is. So now, with the upcoming ODI series, preparation during these in-between periods have become even more important," he said.

Central Zone had beaten North Zone by two wickets in a high-scoring league phase match in Rajshahi on Saturday. The final will be a day-night affair and Saif is expecting another good encounter before the Pakistan series.

"Since we've reached the final, we have the opportunity to play one more match. It's very good preparation for us ahead of the ODI series. Hopefully, we can play even better cricket tomorrow [today]," he added.



Thousands of miles away from the war that started with the US-Israeli missile attack which killed their Supreme Religious Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei over the weekend, Iranian national women's football team played their opening match of the AFC Women's Asian Cup against South Korea in Gold Coast on Monday. The women in white lost the match 3-0, with the players looking dejected at the end of the match.

# 'Women's team needs exposure'

Since her appointment as a Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) director in November last year, renowned corporate figure Rubaba Dowla has been actively involved in several key areas of women's cricket. In an exclusive interview with *The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan*, Rubaba shared her experience at the BCB so far, her vision for women's cricket and various challenges. Excerpts are given below:

**The Daily Star (DS):** How would you rate your time with the BCB so far?

**Rubaba Dowla (RD):** The last four months have been foundational. We have prioritised governance structure, formed steering committees, initiated the WBPL [Women's Bangladesh Premier League], developed clearer planning frameworks, and a defined roadmap for cricket development. I have received excellent support from the BCB team.

**DS:** What are your plans regarding the women's team's preparation for the ICC Women's T20 World Cup in June-July?

**RD:** We are working toward securing more international matches, and structured high-performance camps. After the WBPL, we have a home series with Sri Lanka and then a tri-series in Scotland. We chose Scotland because the conditions will be similar to England, where we will be playing in the World Cup.

**DS:** The women's team currently has an all-local coaching setup. Is there a plan to bring in foreign coaches?

**RD:** The women's team now needs exposure. While local coaches are showing results, we are looking into what is needed to better equip the players. We are looking for specific trainers for areas like batting and will make data driven



decisions to bring in the right support staff within a structured system.

**DS:** Are companies showing interest to own a team in WBPL?

**RD:** Several have shown interest, including owners of current men's BPL franchises. We are waiting for the EOI process to finish [on March 4] to finalise them.

**DS:** Men's BPL has been plagued by non-payment and integrity issues. How will the women's league handle these concerns?

**RD:** Credibility and financial capacity are our top criteria for selecting franchise owners. We are taking franchise fees and security deposits to ensure player payments, just like the men's BPL.

**DS:** Are foreign players showing interest?  
**RD:** We are allowing minimum two and

maximum three international players per team. We have already received direct emails and interest from players who want to know the schedule. Even some of them talked to our players as well.

**DS:** What initiatives are you planning to strengthen talent development?

**RD:** For the first time, we are starting a High Performance (HP) programme for the women's team. About 15-20 players will be there and it will start after the World Cup. We are also focusing on decentralisation, starting with a setup in Sylhet, and we plan to include girls' cricket at the school level.

**DS:** What do you think about the inquiry committee's report on Jahanara Alam's harassment allegations?

**RD:** This matter relates to incidents alleged to have occurred during 2021-22 period. When this current board received the complaint, we treated it with utmost seriousness and constituted an independent inquiry committee. Following its findings, the board reviewed the report and, where prima facie evidence was established in one of the complaints, we took action within our jurisdiction by banning the accused individual from cricketing activities under the BCB. Our priority has been to ensure accountability, uphold due process, and reinforce that player safety and dignity are our priorities.

**DS:** You are also chairing a new complaint committee. Have you received any complaints?

**RD:** Yes, we are handling few harassment cases now. We have already started working on some complaints. I am also initiating training on sexual harassment and policies for players, officials, and higher management.

**DS:** You joined the board as a nominee of the National Sports Council. With a new government in place, do you believe you will get to continue in this role?

**RD:** That decision rests with the appointing authority.

100 DAYS TO GO



## The birth of the World Cup

The FIFA World Cup, now a global spectacle of sport and emotion, was born out of resistance and determination. In the early 20th century, football flourished under the Olympic banner but remained constrained by amateur rules and a lack of independence. The 1908 London Olympics, which limited participation to only national teams for the first time, strengthened football's identity. By the 1924 and 1928 Games, where it emerged as the main attraction, it was clear the sport had outgrown the Olympic stage.

French administrator and former FIFA president Jules Rimet envisioned a standalone global tournament, despite opposition from the International Olympic Committee. The turning point came when football was dropped from the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, prompting FIFA to act.

Uruguay secured hosting rights for the inaugural 1930 tournament, offering to cover teams' expenses. Despite European reluctance, 13 teams competed in Montevideo, launching what would become football's greatest global event.

\*\*Read full story on The Daily Star website