

**What to WATCH**

**T Sports**  
 Women's Asian Cup  
 Japan vs Chinese Taipei  
 Live from 11:00 am  
 Vietnam vs India  
 Live from 5:00 pm  
 T20 World Cup

Semifinal  
 England vs South Africa  
 Live from 7:30 pm  
**Star Sports Select HD1, HD2**  
 Premier League  
 Live from 1:30 am (Thursday):

Brighton vs Arsenal  
 Man City vs Nottingham Forest  
 Aston Villa vs Chelsea  
 Live from 2:15 am (Thursday):  
 Newcastle vs Man Utd

## Eternal cycle of giving and reminding

KHALID HOSSAIN

The scoreline yesterday in Sydney read: China 2 – Bangladesh nil. To the uninitiated, it was a routine victory for the reigning Asian champions. To those who have followed the Bangladesh women's footballers through the smog of Dhaka and the broken promises of the Bangladesh Football Federation, it felt like a miracle of defiance.

Bangladesh's debut at the Women's Asian Cup was a masterclass in heart over infrastructure. The manner of it – the stubborn resistance for 40-odd minutes, the tactical recalibration at half-time, relentless press against a side ranked 17th in the world while Bangladesh sit at 112 – told a more layered story at the picturesque Western Sydney Stadium.

As the game matured, so did they. But when the final whistle blew, a familiar, bitter notion resurfaced: the tragedy of Bangladesh women's football is that it evolves despite the system, not because of it. From the 2022 SAFF winners being denied Olympic qualifiers due to financial shortcomings to the 2026 squad facing China on the back of scaled-down preparation, the cycle feels eternal.

After the 2024 SAFF title and the historic Asian Cup qualification in 2025, the air was thick with the scent of reform. Under the Dr Mohammad Yunus-led interim government and new BFF boss Tabitha Awal, "Mission Australia" was launched with fanfare. BFF women's wing chairman Mahfuza Akter Kiron promised a roadmap of friendlies with much stronger oppositions and a Japan camp.



Instead, the roadmap led to a dead end. The elite preparation consisted of matches against Thailand (ranked 53), Azerbaijan (74) and Malaysia (91) – respectable, but hardly the crucible required to face China or North Korea, ranked ninth. While India toured Turkey for six matches and Uzbekistan prepared in Vietnam, Bangladesh's "overseas camp" amounted to a single practice match against local club Western Sydney FC.

After the qualifiers, captain Afeida Khandaker and her teammates spoke publicly about nutrition, functioning gyms, proper

training grounds and a stable domestic league. It was a damning indictment of the federation that national heroes like Afeida – who had earlier toured Qatar with the then Chief Adviser Dr Yunus – still had to request basic support.

As the players kept training in one of the most polluted cities on earth, on pitches that barely spare their knees, even their team bus could at least have received an air-conditioning upgrade.

Eventually, the golden generation went to the biggest tournament of their lives without

a designated physio. They had spent months in the low-intensity Bhutanese league because their own domestic competition remained in an 18-month limbo, eventually squeezed into a six-week sprint on the unforgiving artificial turf of Kamalapur.

"The conditions that they actually train and live in are not ideal... not conducive to producing professional footballers," Bangladesh coach Peter Butler remarked post-match.

Returning to yesterday's "statement performance", it suggested that the talent in Bangladesh is of top-50 calibre. Bangladesh had stunned near-50-ranked Myanmar in the qualifiers. Rankings, as that night proved, can mislead.

Against China, they did not disgrace themselves. Butler said so. Most neutral observers would agree. But this cannot become an endless cycle where the women keep producing the goods and yet have to keep reminding the authorities of the bare necessities. "We've had our peaks and troughs, we've hit loads of speed bumps in the road," Butler reflected.

One might wonder – what could have been had Bangladesh received preparation suited to a mega event like this?

"We don't have the luxury and the finance and we don't have the opportunity to prepare like other teams do... Hopefully we can give these girls a better life."

Will future structures match their stride? Or will the women continue to give, and remind, and give again?

99 DAYS TO GO

### MESSI'S legendary campaign

At Qatar 2022, Lionel Messi led Argentina to their FIFA World Cup title. He played 690 minutes from the group-stage to the final and scored 7 goals, averaging one goal every 99 minutes – capping off a legendary campaign with the ultimate trophy in his hands.

**GOALS:**  
**Group stage:** Saudi Arabia (1) and Mexico (1)  
**Knockouts:** Australia (1), Netherlands (1) and Croatia (1)  
**Final vs France:** 2 goals

## Perfect Proteas meet resilient Black Caps

AGENCIES

South Africa will look to continue their charge toward a maiden white-ball global crown when they face New Zealand in the first semifinal of the 2026 T20 World Cup at Kolkata's iconic Eden Gardens today.

With defending champions India taking on England in Mumbai a day later, the tantalising prospect of a rematch of the 2024 final looms large.

Led by Aiden Markram, South Africa have been the standout side of the tournament, winning all seven of their matches – the only side to do so.

Their campaign has blended power, poise and maturity – a marked shift from past editions where the Proteas faltered at decisive moments. Last year's World Test Championship triumph appears to have eased long-standing psychological scars, and eight members of that red-ball-winning squad are part of this T20 unit.

South Africa's strength lies in their balance. Markram has provided smooth starts with 268 runs so far, while the likes of Quinton de Kock and David Miller provide explosive firepower.

Their bowling has been equally impressive. Lungi Ngidi's clever change-ups have yielded 12 wickets, and left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj offers control in



the middle overs. South Africa comfortably beat New Zealand in the group-stage, chasing 176 with 17 balls to spare after Markram's unbeaten 86. Yet knockout cricket brings unique pressures. Memories remain fresh of the dramatic 2024 final loss to India, when South Africa collapsed needing 26 from four overs.

To stack up odds further, South Africa

have never won against the Black Caps in the knockout stages in ICC tournaments – having lost the quarterfinal and semifinal in the 2011 and 2015 ODI World Cup, and a defeat in the semis of the 2025 Champions Trophy. But there's a catch. Despite their struggles in 50-over tournaments, the Proteas have swept the Black Caps at T20 World Cups, winning all five meetings.

Mitchell Santner's side, however, squeezed into the semifinals on net run-rate after a Super Eight loss to England but their ability to stay composed in tight qualification scenarios reflects their tournament savvy. Runners-up in 2021, the Black Caps are accustomed to navigating high-pressure knockout fixtures.

At the top, explosive openers Tim Seifert and Finn Allen can tilt the powerplay in New Zealand's favour, while the explosive options in the middle-order – Glenn Phillips and Santner himself provides depth.

Phillips remains their X-factor – a 360-degree hitter capable of transforming a game in a matter of overs – and his athleticism in the field adds another edge.

Their bowling unit offers variety as well. Santner's stump-to-stump left-arm spin is central to their plans, especially against South Africa's right-hand-heavy middle order. The pace of Matt Henry and Lockie Ferguson provide attacking options.

In a knockout contest at Eden Gardens, reputation counts for little; execution under pressure will determine who advances to Sunday's final in Ahmedabad.

## Will Iran play 2026 World Cup in the US?

AFP, Paris

The recent US and Israeli strikes on Iran have cast doubt over whether Iran will take part in the 2026 FIFA World Cup in the United States, where they are scheduled to play group matches later this year.

Iranian Football Federation president Mehdi Taj said shortly after the strikes began that "with this attack and this cruelty, we cannot look forward to the World Cup with hope." "Team Melli" had secured qualification in March last year for a seventh World Cup appearance and a fourth in a row. Iran were drawn in Group G alongside Belgium, Egypt and New Zealand, with two matches set for Los Angeles and one in Seattle.

FIFA has taken a cautious stance. Secretary general Mattias Grafstrom said it was "premature to comment in detail" and that developments would be monitored. A source close to FIFA confirmed no discussions had yet been held with Iran about withdrawal. With 100 days until kickoff, the issue could become sensitive for president Gianni Infantino, particularly as other Gulf nations bound for the tournament – Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan – have also been drawn into the conflict.

FIFA regulations do not explicitly cover a boycott but allow the governing body to act at its discretion in cases of force majeure, including replacing a team. Eight Asian teams have qualified so far, with Iraq still in contention via a play-off. Unlike Olympic boycotts, no World Cup has seen a comparable withdrawal, though precedents exist in other tournaments.

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



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Saif Hassan smashed a 78-ball 87 and stitched a 164-run second-wicket stand with opener Mohammad Naim, who scored 78 off 87 deliveries, to guide Central Zone to a commanding five-wicket victory over North Zone in the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL) final in Mirpur yesterday. After North Zone were bundled out for 238 in 49.3 overs, Central Zone got over the line with 12 overs to spare. The one-day version of the tournament returned following a two-year gap, aiming to prepare the national stars for the upcoming home ODI series against Pakistan this month.

## Real reeling as title ambitions dented

AGENCIES

After 26 matchdays, Real Madrid (60) find themselves four points adrift of leaders Barcelona (64), a gap that now feels heavier than the numbers suggest. Monday's damaging 1-0 home defeat to Getafe handed their archrivals a firm grip in the LaLiga title race – and exposed worrying cracks in Arvalo Arbeloa's side.

A superb Martin Satriano volley stunned the Santiago Bernabeu and condemned Madrid to back-to-back league defeats for the first time since 2020. After already falling at Osasuna last weekend, Real saw Barcelona leapfrog them. Hansi Flick's side now have a significant cushion at the top.

With 36 points still available, Madrid technically remain in the hunt. Arbeloa struck a defiant tone, insisting the record 36-Liga champions would fight until the end.

"No, there are 36 points left, and we have no other objective but to fight for those points," he said. "Four points is a distance we believe we can make up. This is Real Madrid and no one is going to give up here."

Yet the numbers tell a more



troubling story.

Madrid have now fallen behind in seven league matches this season, recovering just five points from those games. In contrast, Barcelona have amassed a league-high 18 points from the 10 matches in which they have trailed – a statistic that underlines the growing difference in resilience between the rivals.

Against Getafe, Madrid created only two clear-cut chances – through Vinicius Junior and Arda Guler – and rarely looked convincing.

Getafe coach Jose Bordalas, who had previously failed to win any of his 16 LaLiga matches against

Madrid (D2 L14), finally broke his duck in emphatic fashion. It was also Getafe's first victory at the Bernabeu since 2008.

Injuries to Jude Bellingham and Kylian Mbappe offered some mitigation, but not enough to excuse a flat display on home soil.

The pressure now intensifies ahead of Friday's tricky trip to Celta Vigo. Madrid have already suffered a 2-0 league defeat to Celta this season and have not lost both meetings in a campaign since 1998-99. Another stumble would not just widen the gap – it could leave their title ambitions in tatters.