

Pace plan in focus as TIGERS EYE SERIES WIN

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will look to go 2-0 up when they meet Pakistan in the second ODI of the three-match series today at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur in a contest that will test their pace formula.

Home advantage was the buzzword in the Bangladesh camp ahead of this series. With qualification to the next year's ICC ODI World Cup still on the line, skipper Mehidy Hasan Miraz too had emphasised before the series that while they needed more matches on true wickets, ensuring direct qualification will remain in focus.

Eventually, rather than depending on a typical low and slow Mirpur turner, the hosts prepared a sporting wicket and banked on their pacers to do the trick – a gutsy call considering Pakistan also has plenty of quality pacers.

Bangladesh were rewarded for their courage in the first ODI on Wednesday, as they won it by a comprehensive eight-wicket margin. A win today will not only seal the series for the Tigers but also help them climb up to ninth position from 10th in the ICC ODI rankings.

The first ODI was virtually decided by a



fiery spell from Bangladesh's speedster Nahid Rana. Pakistan, relatively inexperienced with four debutant batters in the XI, were derailed by Rana's raw pace, in particular his short stuff, mixed with deliveries that moved around on an uncharacteristic Mirpur wicket that provided pace and bounce.

However, before Rana joined the attack in the 10th over to begin a seven-over spell

which yielded five wickets and effectively decided the fate of the match, all had looked pretty well for Pakistan.

Bangladesh's opening bowling pair of Taskin Ahmed and Mustafizur Rahman could not get any early breakthroughs. Especially Mustafizur, Bangladesh's death over specialist, lacked that extra zip with the new ball.

To solve this problem in the second

ODI, the management has the option of bringing in left-arm pacer Shoriful Islam in place of leg-spinner Rishad Hossain, who bowled just two overs in the last game. But it remains to be seen if the Tigers would tinker with the winning combination.

The host batters did not get tested altogether after Pakistan had been bowled out for their lowest-ever score against Bangladesh in the first ODI, 114. Opener Tanzid Hasan Tamim helped himself to a brisk 67 off 42 balls against a Pakistan attack that looked toothless.

The poor showing of the Pakistan pace attack, led by skipper Shaheen Shah Afridi, has improved Haris Rauf's chances of making it into the XI today.

Playing and winning on a sporting surface, like the one in the first ODI where pacers get rewarded for bending their backs and batters could play expansive shots, is the perfect scenario for Bangladesh, who are set to play majority of their upcoming home ODIs at Mirpur, confirmed BCB sources.

However, if Pakistan, who would be better prepared for the surface this time around, put up a better show with the bat and ball today, this formula would be put to the test.

Hamza to join team in Vietnam

SPORTS REPORTER

Fit-again Hamza Choudhury is set to join the Bangladesh team in Vietnam for a FIFA friendly later this month.

The Leicester City midfielder had raised fitness concerns after sustaining a knee injury and leaving the pitch on crutches during a Championship match against Charlton Athletic on January 31, casting doubt over his availability for Bangladesh's final AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers fixture against hosts Singapore on March 31.

However, after a six-match lay-off in February, the 28-year-old England-born midfielder returned with brief appearances against Ipswich Town on March 7 and Bristol City on March 11, putting him back in contention for the March 26 friendly against Vietnam and the Singapore tie.

"Hamza is now fully fit," Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) media committee chairman Amirul Islam Babul said after a national teams committee meeting presided over by BFF president Tabith Awal yesterday.

He further informed that Spanish coach Javier Cabrera will announce a 30-member preliminary squad soon. The national camp begins in Dhaka on March 16 before a 23-member final squad flies to Vietnam on March 21. With Singapore already through to the finals from Group C, the match has become a dead rubber for Bangladesh, who sit third with five points from five matches. The Singapore clash will also mark the end of Cabrera's four-year contract with the BFF.



90 DAYS TO GO



Magic 90

A total of 23 goals were scored in the 90th minute and the following added time during matches at the 2018 World Cup in Russia. It remains the record for the highest number of stoppage-time goals in a single edition of the tournament. A total of 169 goals were scored in that World Cup, meaning nearly 15 percent of the goals came in the closing moments of matches.

**** Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'One mistake, six bullets and the lament of a stunned nation'**

Players frustrated as WBPL shifted to July

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

The decision to postpone the inaugural Women's Bangladesh Premier League (WBPL) from April to July has disappointed players, casting doubt on Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB) commitment to women's cricket.

BCB announced on Wednesday that the three-team WBPL T20 will now be held from July 10-21 across Bogura, Chattogram and Dhaka, instead of the original April 4-14 schedule. The board said the change was made in view of the global context and after consultations with potential franchise owners and stakeholders, allowing more time for squad formation, international player recruitment and operational planning. However, according to Women's FTP, only Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, and Zimbabwe have no engagement during new scheduled timeframe.

The sudden shift – coming days

before the players' draft scheduled for March 14 – has frustrated players and officials. The postponement follows news that the Women's Dhaka Premier Division and First Division Leagues will not take place due to clubs' protests over the board's legitimacy. Insiders also cite a lack of interest from credible franchise owners and instability within the board after the February 12 national polls.

The national team will feel the impact most, as the tournament could have offered valuable preparation for the ICC Women's T20 World Cup in England and Wales in June-July. While the team will play a home series against Sri Lanka and a tri-nation series in Scotland in the build-up to the mega event, other players will have to wait till July to play a domestic fixture, hampering their financial stability. The Tigresses are currently training at BKSP, playing intra-squad matches.

"Everyone is talking about how we had a good chance to play before the World Cup," opener Dilara Akter told

The Daily Star on Thursday.

"We don't get to play T20 matches that often. It will definitely have some impact. Playing matches is important. We could have had a good opportunity here, but it didn't happen."

A member of the national team's coaching staff also expressed frustration, saying the team had missed a valuable opportunity to give the players adequate preparation before the global event.

Former captain Rumana Ahmed criticised the board for a lack of planning. "Such a league was necessary. It would have been excellent preparation for the World Cup and provided a competitive environment. The Dhaka Premier League was postponed to accommodate this tournament," she said.

Rumana also highlighted the absence of a consistent domestic calendar. "Before the last ODI World Cup, the girls couldn't play proper preparation matches. Even the First Division and Premier League have no fixed schedule. Women's cricket remains in a state of uncertainty," she said, questioning how the World Cup squad will be selected without proper domestic fixtures.



SHORT CORNER

Last SA, Windies players leave India after flight delays

The final batch of players from South Africa and the West Indies have left India after being stranded for more than a week following the T20 World Cup on Thursday. International air travel was thrown into chaos because of the war in the Middle East.

North Korea vow no more protests in Women's Asian Cup

North Korea pledged Thursday there will be no more sideline protests during their Women's Asian Cup quarterfinal with Australia after causing a stir against China. They face a partisan full house at Perth Rectangular Stadium on Friday against the hosts.

Bodo/Glimt continue dream UCL debut

Bodo/Glimt continued their dream debut Champions League campaign by swatting aside Sporting Lisbon 3-0 on Wednesday to take a big step towards the quarterfinals. The Norwegians racked up a remarkable fifth consecutive win in the competition in the last-16 first leg at Aspmyra Stadium.

** Read full

stories on The Daily Star's website

Iran uncertainty poses dilemma for FIFA

AGENCIES

Iran's declaration that it cannot take part in the 2026 FIFA World Cup has created uncertainty around the tournament and forced world football's governing body to consider how it would respond if a qualified team withdraw.

Iran's sports minister Ahmad Donyamali said on Wednesday that the country cannot participate in the World Cup, which will be co-hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11 to July 19.

His comments come after the United States and Israel launched airstrikes on Iran nearly two weeks ago that killed the country's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and triggered a region-wide conflict in the Gulf.

Iran were pitted in Group G alongside Belgium, Egypt and New Zealand in last December's draw, with all three of their group matches scheduled to take place in the United States – two in Los Angeles and one in Seattle.

Iran was also the only qualified nation absent from a FIFA planning summit for World Cup participants held last week in Atlanta.

FIFA yet to respond

Despite the minister's comments, Iran has not formally withdrawn from the tournament, and FIFA has yet to comment on the situation.

Only hours before Donyamali's statement, FIFA president Gianni Infantino had cited an assurance from US President Donald Trump that Iran would be "welcome to compete in the tournament in the United States." However, Trump on Thursday also stated that he believed it was not appropriate that Iran be there "for their own life and safety."

If Iran were to confirm its withdrawal, FIFA

would have to determine how to deal with a sudden vacancy in the 48-team competition.

Replacement and sanction possibilities
Under FIFA's World Cup regulations, the governing body has broad authority if a team withdraws from the finals.

Article Six allows FIFA to impose financial penalties on the federation concerned, while also giving it the discretion to invite any nation it chooses to fill the vacant spot – or even proceed without a replacement.

James Kitching, FIFA's former director of football regulatory, told Reuters that "they have full discretion to do whatever they want in the case of a team withdrawing."



Iran secured qualification for the tournament by topping Group A in the third round of Asian qualifiers, meaning a replacement from Asia could appear the most logical option.

Iraq, who are scheduled to take part in an intercontinental playoff in Mexico this month, and the UAE have both been mentioned as potential candidates.

However, the ongoing conflict has disrupted travel in the Middle East, complicating Iraq's preparations for their playoff match against either Bolivia or Suriname.

Kitching suggested FIFA may wait until the remaining playoffs are completed before making any decision.

Rare precedents in World Cup history

Although rare, there are a few historical precedents of teams withdrawing from World Cup.

In 1950, India, Scotland and Turkey all withdrew from the tournament in Brazil, largely due to travel costs, logistical difficulties and domestic decisions. FIFA attempted to find replacements but eventually proceeded with only 13 teams.

Uruguay, the defending champions in 1934, boycotted the tournament in Italy after several European teams had refused to travel to South America for the inaugural World Cup in 1930.

In 1966, all African nations boycotted the World Cup in England to protest against the limited qualification places allocated to their continent. The protest later led FIFA to grant Africa a guaranteed World Cup spot from the 1970 tournament.

With Iran yet to formally withdraw, FIFA now faces a situation rarely encountered in the modern era – one that could require a quick decision as the countdown to the 2026 World Cup continues.



VALVERDE HATTRICK STUNS CITY

Against all the odds -- including injury setbacks and sketchy form -- Real Madrid stunned Manchester City 3-0 in the first leg of the Champions League last 16, thanks to a maiden career hattrick from skipper Federico Valverde on Wednesday night. Not only City, it has also been a difficult round for English clubs in the Champions League, as Chelsea were thrashed 5-2 by defending champions PSG away from home, and Arsenal held to a 1-1 draw at Bayer Leverkusen. In the previous matchday, Tottenham were thrashed by Atletico Madrid while Liverpool were stunned by Galatasaray.

PHOTO: REUTERS