

Bangladesh face stern Vietnam test ahead of Singapore tie

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will look to build confidence from facing a 'strong' Vietnam side in a FIFA international friendly today, ahead of their Singapore tie, head coach Javier Cabrera said during a pre-match press conference in Hanoi on Wednesday.

The match will kick off at 6:00pm Bangladesh time.

The men in red and green face a formidable challenge against Vietnam, who are ranked 103rd in the world – 78 places above Bangladesh – in what will be their first international fixture of the year.

Having largely competed against South Asian opponents and lower-ranked Southeast Asian sides in recent years, Bangladesh will finally test themselves against one of the region's most competitive outfits.

"Our main objective is to prepare for the upcoming official match against Singapore," Cabrera said during the pre-match press conference in Hanoi on Wednesday. "Facing Vietnam is very important for us, as they are one of the strongest teams in Southeast Asia. Playing against them will help build our confidence."

Vietnam are the reigning Southeast Asian champions, having won the title three times. While Bangladesh have played several matches against sides like Laos



PHOTO: BFF

and Cambodia in recent times – often with positive results – and also faced other Southeast Asian teams with mixed outcomes, today's match will be only the third meeting between Bangladesh and

Vietnam. The two sides previously met during the 2002 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers in Dammam in 2001, where Bangladesh held Vietnam to a goalless draw in the first

encounter before suffering a 4-0 defeat a few days later.

Cabrera also acknowledged the strength of the hosts' current squad, which includes naturalised players like Xuan Son and Hoang Hen.

Bangladesh captain Jamal Bhuyan, meanwhile, struck a more optimistic tone about the prospect of a competitive match.

"It will be a difficult match, but Bangladesh are improving. We believe we have the ability to compete with Vietnam," Jamal said.

Vietnam head coach Kim Sang Sik said their target is victory, although he acknowledged Bangladesh's recent progress.

"Bangladesh have changed a lot compared to last year, from the coaching staff to the squad, especially with the addition of players competing abroad... I believe their current squad is much stronger than before," he said, adding that his team is "analysing videos of Hamza Choudhury to find ways to deal with his strengths."

The arrival of Hamza on Tuesday has boosted Bangladesh's squad, but Cabrera remained cautious about his immediate involvement.

"Hamza only arrived yesterday afternoon. He is doing well, but needs time to adjust to the weather and time zone. We will assess and consider his availability for the match," the Spaniard said.

Bangladesh's compound men's archery team secured a place in the final of the 2026 Asia Cup World Ranking Tournament (Stage 1) after strong performances in the elimination rounds yesterday. Nawaz Ahmed Rakib, Himu Bachhar and Aishwarzo Rahman edged past Malaysia in the quarterfinal with a 231-231 draw before winning the shoot-off 30-27, and then defeated Bhutan 232-228 in the semifinals. They will face Vietnam in the gold medal match on March 27.

PHOTO: BAF



77 DAYS TO GO



GOALLESS DRAWS GALORE

In the history of the World Cup, a total of 77 matches (including extra time) have ended goalless. Alongside the 1982, 2006, 2010, and 2014 editions, the recently concluded Qatar World Cup saw a record seven matches finish without a goal.

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Six in PSL signals shifting tide

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

For years, all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan and pacer Mustafizur Rahman were Bangladesh's only regulars in franchise-based T20 leagues around the world before leg-spinner Rishad Hossain joined their ranks with recent appearances in the Pakistan Super League (PSL) and Big Bash League (BBL).

Despite that slight progress, opportunities for other Bangladeshi players remained limited, largely due to inconsistent performances and, at times, a lack of confidence stemming from earlier underwhelming stints by compatriots.

However, this year's PSL marks a significant shift.

The tournament, which begins today at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium, will feature six Bangladeshi players – the highest number from the country in a single overseas franchise league.

Mustafizur and Parvez Hossain Emon will represent Lahore Qalandars, while Shoriful Islam, Nahid Rana and Tanzid Hasan Tamim will play for Peshawar Zalmi. Rishad, meanwhile, is set to represent Rawalpindi Pindiz.

All players have already joined their respective squads after receiving partial NOCs and government clearance.

For Tanzid and Emon, the PSL will mark their first experience in overseas franchise cricket. Shoriful has previously featured in the Lanka Premier League (LPL) and several T10 competitions, while Nahid was part of a previous PSL edition but did not get a game.

Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB's)



cricket operations chairman Nazmul Abedeen Fahim believes such exposure will play a vital role in their development as players.

"Playing at home in familiar conditions is very different from performing in an unfamiliar environment with a new team, new crowd and added pressure. This is where professionalism and accountability truly come into play – something we cannot fully replicate in domestic cricket," Fahim told The Daily Star on Wednesday.

"While experienced players like Mustafizur know what to expect, for others this is a huge learning opportunity. Those who succeed will gain confidence,

and the national team will benefit from that growth," he added.

Fahim also noted that improved performances could open more doors for Bangladeshi cricketers in global leagues.

"There might have been questions about how much trust there was in our players before, but that area seems to be improving as they become more reliable to others... If we look at Sri Lanka or Afghanistan, playing in foreign franchises is a major source of their strength. We haven't been able to utilise this area until now, but with six players going this time, I hope more will go next year."

Former national cricketer and coach Hannan Sarkar credited recent improvements in domestic conditions as a reason behind this surge in numbers.

"A positive factor is that the BPL has been played on better wickets for the last two years. This has helped our bowlers develop and our batters grow their shot-making abilities. Franchise teams show interest because they observe who performs well in our domestic franchise leagues."

Previously, Mashrafe bin Mortaza, Mohammad Ashraful and Litton Das had featured in the Indian Premier League (IPL), while Tamim Iqbal, Mahmudullah, Mushfiqur Rahim, Sabbir Rahman and Anamul Haque had stints in the PSL, though few managed to secure long-term success.

With a new generation now getting opportunities, Bangladesh's cricket fraternity will hope these players will seize the moment.

SHORT CORNER

Salah's Liverpool goodbye signals end of glorious era

Mohamed Salah's long goodbye from Liverpool signals the end of a glorious era and leaves the Premier League giants facing another expensive rebuild. The Egyptian superstar announced on Tuesday that he would be leaving Anfield at the end of the season after a glittering nine-year spell at the club. An emotional Salah, 33, expressed his love for Liverpool, where he stands alongside the all-time greats. He has won two Premier League titles along with a Champions League and other silverware and piled up a remarkable number of personal awards.

BCB selectors get zonal duty

The newly formed four-member national selection panel has been assigned zonal responsibilities alongside their regular duties, informed Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) cricket operations chairman Nazmul Abedeen Fahim. BCB on Monday announced the panel, headed by Habibul Bashar, with its tenure running until the selection of Bangladesh's squad for the ICC World Cup 2027, scheduled to be held in Africa in October-November. "The major change in this selection panel is that while the four selectors will pick the national team, 'A' team and High Performance (HP) squad, each of them will also be responsible for a specific region," Fahim told The Daily Star on Wednesday.

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Frustration mounts as DPL stalls

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Bangladesh T20I team all-rounder Shamim Hossain was battling to throwdowns yesterday evening at Mirpur's Academy Ground, seemingly going through his motions.

Usually at this time of the year, the players are busy with the List A competition Dhaka Premier League (DPL). But as the leagues remains in limbo due to the standoff between the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) and the clubs, Shamim's lone presence in Mirpur was symbolic of the dearth of cricket at the very home of the country's cricket.

Social media posts from several cricketers over the past few days shows that the pangs of lack of DPL is starting to hit.

Moin Khan, a domestic cricketer, had posted that in the previous years, after Eid vacations, they would be playing in the Super League stage of DPL, but this time they don't even know when the league would begin.



Shamim shared his frustrations. "Actually, the situation right now is quite funny. The DPL is not taking place in a country like ours... it looks odd," Shamim told members of the media, adding how not staging the country's premier List A competition on the year before the World Cup could have an adverse effect.

"We would also be playing the ODI World Cup in 2027, right? If we don't prepare from now on, what will we do when the tournament comes?"

"For those outside the national team, it's harmful from a financial point of view. It's not good for Bangladeshi cricketers. So, I believe it's important to revive the league as soon as possible," Shamim said.

For Shamim, who is trying to carve a path back into the ODI setup, the DPL would have provided a chance to return in the discussions.

Last season, he scored 396 runs in nine innings, averaging over 56 at a strike rate of 126.11. His performances had reopened the national team door for him.

With World Cup coming and the DPL still uncertain, Shamim now hopes that

the three-match T20I series against New Zealand at home next month would help him get a foot in the door in the ODI setup.

"If the DPL had taken place, it would have been a good opportunity to make a comeback. Since there are less chances of matches taking place, there is nothing to gain from thinking over it. Since the T20I series [against New Zealand] is ahead of us, my focus will be on doing well there to get back to the ODI side," Shamim said.

Despite his frustrations, Shamim was keen on finding new avenues in his batting yesterday during his first net session after the vacation. Known for improvised shots, Shamim appeared to be curbing his tendencies for safer options.

"Just preparing myself for the games ahead. Slowly getting ready. Since the camp is coming up, I'm preparing myself for that," he said, referring to the national team's camp which is set to begin on Friday ahead of next month's white-ball home series against New Zealand.

Ideally, players, whether one is part of the national team or not, would be working on batting templates in actual match scenarios in the DPL. This time, it is up to the individuals to prepare themselves. And as long as the stalemate between BCB and the clubs continues, Bangladesh cricket and its cricketers will continue to suffer.

AZZURRI ON EDGE

AGENCIES

For Italy, the route to the FIFA World Cup 2026 remains tense despite its expansion to 48 teams. Even with Europe allotted 16 places, the four-time champions must navigate the play-offs – one of 16 teams competing for the final four spots – underlining their recent decline.

Since lifting the trophy in 2006, the Azzurri have endured two group-stage exits and missed the last two editions. Now under Gennaro Gattuso, the task is clear: avoid a third consecutive absence.

Italy host Northern Ireland in Bergamo in tonight's semifinal, with Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina awaiting in the final.

"We can't stress the lads, they're well aware of what the stakes are. There will obviously be some tension, but we have to make sure we transmit positivity," Gattuso said.

Poor performances by Italian clubs in this season's Champions League have deepened a sense of decline, with another failure to qualify for the finals in the USA, Canada and Mexico widely viewed as a potential death knell.

"Failing to qualify for the World Cup would be an enormous blow, above all on an economic level," said former Italy defender and 2006 winner Massimo Oddo.

- Italy have missed four World Cups – 1930, 1958, 2018 and 2022 – with the recent back-to-back absences marking their worst drought.
- Unable to host matches at home, Ukraine face Sweden on neutral ground in Spain, four years after their last play-off heartbreak.
- At 37, Poland striker Robert Lewandowski may be making his last bid for a World Cup appearance as his side take on Albania.
- Less than a decade after joining FIFA, Kosovo face Slovakia, two wins away from a maiden World Cup qualification.

