



76 DAYS TO GO

76 and counting for Brazil

Brazil hold the record for the most wins in World Cup history, having secured a total of 76 victories, with Carlo Ancelotti's side looking to go further up this table in the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Meanwhile, Germany follow Brazil closely in second place with 68 wins. Among the other world champions, Argentina have recorded 47 wins, Italy 45, and France 39. The list is rounded out by England with 32 wins, Spain with 31, and Uruguay with 25.

**** Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'The day football died'**



SPORTS CAN BRING HONOUR TO THE NATION: PM

As per tradition, the sporting community of the country observed the 56th Independence Day yesterday, with Prime Minister Tarique Rahman and his daughter Zaima Rahman attending an exhibition football match between former national players -- divided into Red and Green teams -- at the National Stadium in Dhaka. The PM also received a commemorative jersey from former national goalkeeper and now State Minister for Youth and Sports Aminul Haque, who also participated in the match. Speaking on the occasion, the PM urged a vibrant sports culture. "I believe that sports can bring honour to the nation and are capable of creating a beautiful bond of friendship and brotherhood among us," he said. Meanwhile, former Bangladesh cricketer Mohammad Rafique rolled back the years at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur, guiding BCB Red to a commanding victory over BCB Green with an all-round performance in an exhibition cricket match.

PHOTO: BCB/BFF

Prominent hockey figure Ripon no more

SPORTS REPORTER

Zaki Ahmed Ripon, a prominent figure in Bangladesh hockey as both a player and administrator, died of cardiac arrest yesterday. He was 63.

He fell ill with chest pain in the early hours and was taken to a city hospital, where he later passed away. He is survived by his wife, two daughters and numerous well-wishers.

Ripon, who represented Abahani during the 1980s, remained closely associated with the club long after his playing days and was serving as secretary of its hockey committee at the time of his death. He also held senior roles within the sport's administration, including vice-president and joint secretary of the Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF), and was an executive member of the Bangladesh Olympic Association (BOA).

His namaz-e-janaza was held at Dhanmondi's Modhubagh Mosque and at the Abahani Club premises before burial at Rayerbazar graveyard.

Tributes were paid by the BHF, the BOA, Mohammedan SC and other sporting bodies, who expressed their condolences to his family.

Vietnam too strong for Bangladesh

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh suffered a comprehensive 3-0 defeat to Vietnam in a FIFA friendly in Hanoi yesterday, as they continue preparations for their AFC Asian Cup Group 31 clash against hosts Singapore.

All three goals came in the first half. Phan Tuan Hai, Pham Xuan Manh and Nguyen Hai Long each found the net within the opening 40 minutes, highlighting the technical and tactical superiority of Vietnam, who are ranked 103rd in the world -- 78 places above Bangladesh.

The men in red and green, who had also lost to the same opponents twice during the 2002 World Cup qualifiers in Dammam, struggled to cope with the pace and precision of the home side.

However, Spanish coach Javier Cabrera's charges dominated possession early at the National Stadium, but they were soon chasing shadows. Vietnam's crisp passing with rapid attacks down both flanks repeatedly tested Bangladesh's Topu Barman-less backline, while the absence of suspended midfielder Rakib Hossain had limited their threat in the final third.

Vietnam's pressure told early. Tuan Hai guided a deep corner from Thuong Tien Anh into the net in the eighth minute, while Thuong and midfielder Nguyen



Quang Hai kept Bangladeshi defenders on their toes. In the 18th minute, left-back Xuan Manh rose to meet a Quang Hai free-kick, doubling the lead, after goalkeeper Mehedi Hasan Srabon had tipped a powerful Nguyen Hoang Duc shot over the bar. Hai Long then added a third in the 38th minute, leaving Srabon disappointed as he could have done better after a couple of good saves.

The second half allowed both sides to rotate squads ahead of the Asian Cup tie. Bangladesh fielded lit again Bishwanath Ghosh, Emon Shahriar and Jamal Bhuiyan, and enjoyed better possession late on. Hamza Chowdhury nearly scored from a Suman Reza flick, while Bangladesh survived late scares as substitutes Nguyen Xuan Son and Pham Gia Hung struck the post twice in the dying minutes.

SHORT CORNER

BCB unfazed by directors' exits as door remains open for Mashrafe: Faruque

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) vice-president Faruque Ahmed said yesterday that the board would not 'stop functioning' even though two of its directors recently resigned amid the ongoing crisis faced by the Aminul Islam Bulbul-led board. He also acknowledged former skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's contributions to Bangladesh cricket and said that, if there are no legal issues, Mashrafe will be able to come to the board.

India to end home season with five Australia Tests

India will host Australia in a high-profile five-Test series starting January next year to end the 2026/27 home season, the country's cricket board announced on Thursday. "The season will culminate with the prestigious and much-anticipated Border-Gavaskar Trophy, featuring a five-match Test series against Australia, beginning on January 21, 2027, in Nagpur," the Board of Control for Cricket in India said.

Asian Cup draw postponed as Middle East conflict continues

The draw for January's Asian Cup final, which was due to be held in Riyadh on April 11, has been postponed, the Asian Football Confederation announced on Thursday. Officials have rescheduled the event to a later date "to ensure the undisrupted attendance of all stakeholders at the final draw ceremony," the governing body said in a statement.

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Ashrafal keen to 'test bench strength' in NZ T20Is

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh are set to inject fresh blood into their T20I squad for the upcoming series against New Zealand, running from April 27 to May 2, according to Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) sources.

With six of their players, including pace spearhead Mustafizur Rahman, engaged in the 2026 Pakistan Super League and exempted from the series, it might open the door for another pacer to stake a claim.

Batting coach Mohammad Ashrafal welcomed the prospect of giving opportunities to emerging talent when established players are unavailable due to franchise commitments, injuries, or personal reasons.

"Definitely. I would say, regarding the last two boards, since Faruque [Ahmed] bhai and [Aminul Islam] Bulbul bhai arrived, their thinking is a bit different," he told reporters after the Independence Day Exhibition match at Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium yesterday.

"Previously, the situation was that we brought Mustafizur back from Chennai [Super Kings] to play against Zimbabwe and didn't let him play the knockout match. Now, however, this isn't happening.

"If you look at the series we lost against the United Arab Emirates, Mustafizur wasn't there because of the Indian Premier League. So,



this is a positive side... and we haven't done this before, but now we are doing it, and this is how it should be," he said on BCB's stance of allowing cricketers to thrive in franchise leagues despite the national team's series.

"We might not always have every player available; there could be injuries or family issues, and at those times another player should be given the opportunity. I don't know the lengths of the PSL NOCs, but if a new player gets a chance, it will be an opportunity for them and for us to test bench strength," added the former Bangladesh captain.

Pacer Ripon Mondol or all-rounder Abdul Gallar Saqlain, who have appeared in the Asia Cup Rising Stars tournament, will be in the selectors' radar for the New Zealand T20Is. Meanwhile, pacers Tanzim Sakib and Hasan Mahmud have recovered from injury issues, according to BCB medical department officials.

Ashrafal divulged that players from all three formats will be starting the camp on Friday.

"We will be starting with fitness and fielding, and the initial phase will be from [March] 27 to April 2. Then there are gaps on 3rd and 4th before the skill camp begins. There were tight schedules in the BPL, and after that in Odommo Cup, BCL, and then the Pakistan series. Since we have got some time [before New Zealand ODI], we will be doing work on fitness and fielding for a week. The Test and white-ball players will be there, and all the coaching staff."



Argentina skipper Lionel Messi and midfielder Leandro Paredes look all set to begin their final stretch of preparations ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, as the defending champions face Mauritania on Saturday morning in their first of two friendlies before the quadrennial event. They will then take on Zambia on April 1, with both friendlies set to be held at La Bombonera in Buenos Aires. Lionel Scaloni's side were scheduled to play Spain in the "Finalissima" in Qatar during this international window, but the game was canceled due to the conflict in the Middle East.

PHOTO: X