

## HEROES' HOMECOMING

The Bangladesh U-20 squad was accorded a hero's welcome yesterday upon their return from the Maldives, a day after reclaiming the SAFF U-20 Championship title with a victory over India in Male. The winners were received at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka by State Minister for Youth and Sports Aminul Haque before heading to a formal reception at the Hatirjheel Amphitheatre via an open-top bus parade through the capital.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



## U-20 women go down to China

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh suffered their second successive defeat in the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup as favourites China handed the girls in red and green a 2-0 loss in their Group A clash at Nonthaburi Stadium in Bangkok yesterday.

Bangladesh now must beat Vietnam on April 7 to keep their hopes of reaching the knockout stage alive.

After a goalless first half, Yu Xingyue and Wang Aifang struck after the break to seal China's second straight win, following their convincing victory over Vietnam.

Still reeling from a narrow loss to Thailand, Bangladesh made one change to the starting lineup, with coach Peter Butler bringing in Puja Das for Sopna Rani. However, the side failed to find rhythm against one of Asia's strongest teams.

China dominated from the outset, applying constant pressure on the Bangladesh defence, where goalkeeper Mile Akter put in a resilient performance.

China broke the deadlock two minutes into the second half when Zeng Yujia advanced down the right and squared for Yu Xingyue, who finished from close range. Struggling to cope, Bangladesh conceded again in the 82nd minute as Aifang converted a free-kick.

## Ronan the answer to senior team's striker void?

ANISUR RAHMAN

SAFF U-20 champions Bangladesh returned home yesterday amid a festive mood, with a trophy parade from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport to the Hatirjheel Amphitheatre on an open-top bus – a grand reception reminiscent of those previously hosted by the Bangladesh Football Federation for the history-making women's national and futsal teams.

While securing a second regional youth title is a significant milestone, the campaign's true revelation was Ronan Sullivan. The US-born forward, hailing from the Philadelphia Union Academy, enjoyed a dream debut in the red and green that exceeded all expectations.

The 18-year-old striker consistently impressed throughout the tournament. From his clinical brace against Pakistan to his vital assist for the winner against Nepal, Ronan proved his worth. However, it was his audacious Panenka in the high-pressure final shootout – taking the fifth and decisive penalty – that provided the ultimate evidence of the big game temperament and technical confidence required for international football.

With the Bangladesh senior national team currently starved of genuine goal-scorers, former national player-turned-coach Shafiqul Islam Manik believes Ronan's promotion to the senior squad should be considered sooner rather than later.

"Ronan deserves a call-up in the trial camp of the national football team if we want to fill up the long lacking of the genuine striker in the senior team," Manik told The Daily Star yesterday.

"He has performed really well in the number nine position of the Bangladesh U-20 side, having good movements in the attacking third, along with good shooting and free-kick ability," added the

because the 17-year-old footballer also plays in the national team at the world level. I think he has the possibility to click for the national side, though the level of the U-20 and national team is not similar," said Manik, adding that Ronan should follow a similar developmental path to the one laid out for Zayyan.

Just two months prior to this tournament, it was not even certain that



experienced AFC A licence coach.

"As there is no opportunity to see him in the Bangladesh Football League, Ronan can be tested by giving him a chance in the national team's training camp and FIFA international friendly matches."

Drawing a parallel with US based Zayyan Ahmed, Manik noted that while Zayyan initially struggled in trials, he proved his quality with the U-23 side before earning a senior call-up.

"We should make room for Ronan

Ronan would represent Bangladesh. Ronan, for his part, has already set his sights higher. "Senior team, that's the goal," he said after the final.

Manik also urged the football authorities to actively create space for overseas-based forwards. He noted that homegrown attackers currently face an uphill battle to secure starting spots in the domestic league due to the heavy influx of foreign signings in the Bangladesh Premier League.

## BCB extends Miraz, Litton tenures

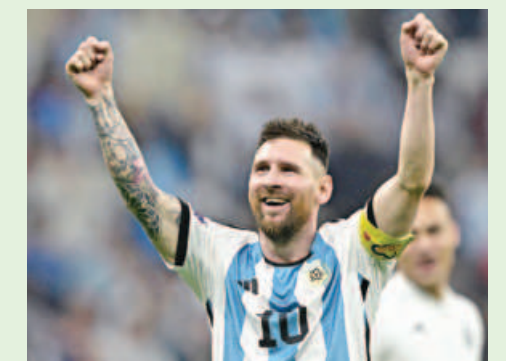
SPORTS REPORTER

The fourth board of directors meeting of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) was held yesterday in Mirpur. Extension of the captaincy tenures of its existing leadership groups in ODIs and T20Is, and the appointment of former cricketer Mohammad Rafique as a specialised BCB coach were the biggest outcomes from the meeting. Notably, BCB director Faiazur Rahman also resigned from his position after the meeting, becoming the fourth director of the current board to do so.

The outcomes of the meeting are as follows:

- ODI captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz's tenure, which was set to expire in June, has been extended till the 2027 ICC World Cup.
- T20I captain Litton Das, whose tenure ended in March, will continue as skipper till the 2028 ICC T20 World Cup.
- The tenures of ODI and T20I vice-captains -- Najmul Hossain Shanto and Saif Hassan -- have also been similarly extended.
- Former Bangladesh cricketer Mohammad Rafique has been appointed as a specialised spin bowling coach for one year.
- A pension scheme for players and officials set to be launched by the BCB. A primary committee set to begin work on the initiative.
- An inter-university cricket tournament will be launched.
- The board to restart BCB Award Night to recognise players and journalists.

67 GOALS  
DAYS LEFT



## Masters of longevity

The combined number of World Cup matches played by the top three South American players stands at 67. Lionel Messi leads the tally with 26 matches, followed by Diego Maradona with 21, while Cafu and Javier Mascherano (20 each) jointly hold third place. Meanwhile, Europe's top three players in this regard are Lothar Matthaus (25 matches), Miroslav Klose (24), and Paolo Maldini (23), with a combined total of 72 matches.

\*\* Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'Battle for the golden trophy: All you need to know'.

## BFF's fixation on Cabrera

ANISUR RAHMAN

The National Teams Committee (NTC) of the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) yesterday initiated the search for a new head coach following a meeting, as Spanish coach Javier Cabrera's contract is set to expire on April 30.

There, however, remains a catch – Cabrera himself will also be allowed to appear for an interview. The Spaniard has delivered underwhelming results, with 10 wins, 10 draws, and 19 losses in a tenure of over four years since his appointment in January 2022. Yet, the BFF has not opted to completely part ways with him before beginning the search for a successor.

Such a move can be interpreted in two ways: either the BFF is not confident of attracting someone better than the current coach, or it is unwilling to go through the process of starting anew.

"We are neither thinking of his exclusion, nor thinking of his inclusion," said NTC member and BFF media committee chairman Amirul Islam Babu when asked about keeping Cabrera in contention.

"He [Cabrera] still has about a month remaining in his contract. So, we are searching for someone better than him. If we find someone better than him, then we will think along those lines," he added.

Babu's remarks appear to indicate the governing body's continued inclination towards



the Spanish tactician, who, despite coming under scrutiny after completing his initial 11-month contract, received three extensions along with significant salary increases under both former and current BFF presidents, Kazi Salahuddin and Tabith Awal.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a former BFF executive member who was also part of the previous National Teams Management Committee, said: "The then national teams committee also rejected the appointment of Cabrera in 2022 before he got the job with the blessing of the previous BFF president Kazi Salahuddin."

While most members of the current NTC remain reluctant to reappoint Cabrera, there have also been murmurs about how discussions unfold whenever the topic of replacing him arises – with those advocating change being asked to find a better alternative themselves.

As it stands, in its apparent fixation on Cabrera, the BFF has overlooked established channels typically followed in hiring a new coach, such as issuing open advertisements, liaising with international coaching agents, or assigning the technical department to conduct the search.

Hence, it would not be a surprise to see Cabrera – already the longest-serving coach in Bangladesh football history – extend his tenure, even though the BFF insists it will handle his case in a new manner if he appears for the interview.



## HAALAND HATTRICK PROPELS CITY TO FA CUP SEMIS

Erling Haaland hit a hat-trick as Manchester City thrashed Liverpool 4-0 on Saturday to reach the FA Cup semifinals and increase the pressure on Reds boss Arne Slot. Haaland netted twice late in the first half of the quarter-final at the Etihad Stadium and completed his treble after the interval following an Antoine Semenyo strike.

PHOTO: REUTERS