



Pacers Nahid Rana and Shoriful Islam returned to national duty at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday after playing key roles in Peshawar Zalmi's four-match unbeaten run in the Pakistan Super League (PSL). Rana impressed with his pace and bounce, claiming seven wickets at an economy of 5.42, including a record spell of three for seven in four overs – the most economical by a foreign pacer in PSL history. He was also effective in the death overs. Shoriful, meanwhile, contributed with two wickets, particularly with the new ball. With sporting wickets expected, Rana will look to carry his aggression from the PSL and last month's Pakistan series into the upcoming New Zealand series, beginning tomorrow.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'Lot of room to improve' in Bangladesh batting

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's middle-order issues have been laid bare over the past year, with several players rotating through the role without making a lasting impression. Thus, apart from top-order issues, partnerships down the order and their impact remain a cause for concern in the 50-over setup.

One of the players brought back into the mix to address that gap is Afif Hossain. Dropped after the 2023 Asia Cup, Afif spent a year out of the ODI side. His fortunes improved with a hundred in the Bangladesh Cricket League – coming in at No. 4, where he mostly batted in the competition – earning him a recall for last month's Pakistan series. However, his ODI record since being sidelined after the Asia Cup, yielded 124 runs without a fifty at an average of just over 24, has yet to ease concerns over his comfort and adaptability in a middle-order role.

Those concerns were echoed in Phil Simmons's press conference yesterday ahead of the home ODI series against New Zealand, beginning on Friday, as the Bangladesh head coach surmised why the middle order continues to be an issue following the departure of Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad.

"It seems like all our batsmen bat in the top order in domestic cricket. It is



the same for [Mehidy Hasan] Miraz and everyone else down the order," Simmons said when asked how difficult it is for a top-order batter to adapt to number six.

"Everybody seems to bat in the top order domestically, but when they come here, they have to fit into different positions. So far, the guys have been trying very hard to adapt to those positions. One of the big aspects of international cricket is that you

have to adapt to what is in front of you, not just what you have done in domestic cricket," Simmons added.

The message seemed to be clear: do the job that is being asked of you. Yet, the roles do not always fit the profile. The highest middle-order partnership – four to six in the batting order – in the last 12 months is 101 between Miraz and Tawhid Hridoy, which came in a losing cause. The duo have played six innings together in this period, scoring 172 runs at a run-rate of 4.41, clearly lacking the middle-overs acceleration required in ODIs.

Meanwhile, Jaker Ali, Shamim Hossain and Mahidul Islam Ankon have either failed to get a foothold or made little impact despite being carried in the squad, prompting a shift that sees Litton Das preferred in the middle order, while Hridoy has adjusted to greater responsibility. Simmons noted Hridoy is "accepting that responsibility" and backed his domestic form to translate.

Concerns extend to the lower middle order as well, especially when quick runs are required. Among Afif, Miraz and Rishad, only the latter has shown glimpses of big hitting, but without consistency.

Simmons admitted Bangladesh have "a lot of room to improve... from the top down to numbers five, six, seven and eight," underlining the scale of the batting challenge.

BFF's recurring calendar crisis

ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) continues to grapple with a recurring dilemma: balancing national team preparations with the smooth operation of domestic competitions – two elements crucial to each other's growth.

Unlike most footballing nations, BFF creates time for the national team by carving it out of the domestic calendar. This approach has repeatedly led to the scrapping of tournaments, disrupting the continuity of local competitions.

With the next season set to begin in June, uncertainty surrounds the remaining events of the ongoing campaign. The Independence Cup and Super Cup are now in doubt after the Professional League Management Committee (PLMC) announced that the 2026-27 transfer window will open on June 1.

The current calendar included five top-tier competitions: the one-off Challenge Cup, the Bangladesh Football League (BFL), Federation Cup, Independence Cup and Super Cup. So far, only the Challenge Cup final has been completed. The Federation Cup and BFL are set to end on May 19 and May 23, respectively, leaving just eight days to stage the remaining two tournaments.

PLMC vice chairman Zakir Hossain Chowdhury said they "will be trying to hold the Independence Cup", but the practicality is questionable. The tournament typically involves all professional league teams, divided into four groups, and requires around three weeks to complete.



Since the BFL kicked off on September 26, 2025, the league has been suspended for more than 15 weeks due to national team preparations, the mid-season transfer window and the national election.

Meanwhile, the national team will start gearing up for June 5 FIFA international friendly against San Marino, further tightening the already congested schedule.

Since the BFL kicked off on September 26, 2025, the league has been suspended for more than 15 weeks due to national team

preparations, the mid-season transfer window and the national election. Much of this downtime was used for national team camps, raising questions about the emphasis on domestic competitions.

A similar situation unfolded last season, when both the Independence Cup and Super Cup were scrapped due to time constraints. This reduced match exposure for local players, despite the general need for footballers to play 30 to 40 domestic matches annually to maintain their level.

These disruptions reflect a lack of coordination between the PLMC and the National Teams Committee. The BFL schedule has frequently been adjusted to accommodate extended preparation periods, including the recent AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers.

While global practice typically confines national team preparations within FIFA windows, the BFF has regularly allowed extended camps. This has led to repeated interruptions in the BFL and Federation Cup, leaving insufficient time to complete all competitions.

The pauses have also increased costs for financially struggling clubs, many of whom believe regular domestic competition better prepares players for international football than prolonged training camps.

Despite these challenges, the league committee has again included all five competitions in the draft calendar for the 2026-27 season, raising questions about the practicality of planning tournaments that may not be held.

56 DAYS TO GO



Teams that waited half a century

Two teams have experienced a 56-year gap between World Cup appearances – Egypt (1934 and 1990) and Norway (1938 and 1994). Wales top this list, having ended a 64-year absence when they returned in 2022, their previous appearance dating back to 1958.

**** Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'Howard the human wall'**



RUBEL retires from international cricket

STAR SPORTS DESK

Pacer Rubel Hossain announced his retirement from international cricket yesterday via a Facebook post, bringing an end to a career that had effectively been inactive at the top level in recent years. The 36-year-old pacer last represented Bangladesh on April 1, 2021, in a T20I against New Zealand in Auckland and has remained out of the national setup since. A right-arm quick who played a key role in several of Bangladesh's finest moments, Rubel last featured in first-class cricket in 2020, before making appearances in a List A match in 2024 and a T20 game in 2025.

ODIs	T20Is	Tests
Matches: 104	Matches: 28	Matches: 27
Wickets: 129	Wickets: 28	Wickets: 36
Economy: 5.67	Economy: 9.45	Economy: 3.92
Average: 34.31	Average: 32.57	Average: 76.77
Strike-rate: 36.2	Strike-rate: 20.6	Strike-rate: 117.3

Rubel took the final wicket against England at the 2015 ICC World Cup in Adelaide, sealing Bangladesh's first-ever quarterfinal berth.

He claimed the final wicket in Bangladesh's 4-0 ODI series win over New Zealand in 2010.

The right-arm pacer took an ODI hat-trick against New Zealand in 2013. His best ODI figures of 6-26 are jointly the best for Bangladesh, alongside Mashrafe Mortaza.

Local footballers demand abolition of SAARC quota

SPORTS REPORTER

A group of professional footballers, under the banner of the Football Players' Welfare Association (FPWA), yesterday submitted a six-point petition to the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president Tabith Awal, calling for the complete abolition of the South Asian footballers' quota in the Bangladesh Football League (BFL).

The demands include ensuring greater playing opportunities for domestic players, strengthening the development of local footballers through long-term planning, increasing the number of clubs in the professional league, taking responsibility for the financial security of local players, and reducing the quota of foreign players in the league.

The demands come at a time when the Professional League Management Committee has declared that the transfer window for the

2026-27 season will open on June 1.

Although South Asian players such as Nepal's Ganesh Thapa and Raju Sakya, along with Sri Lanka's Packer Ali and Prem Lal once enthralled football fans in the 1980s and 1990s while playing under the foreign quota, the BFF introduced a new rule in the 2025-26 season allowing each professional league club to field up to five South Asian players as locals. This has reduced opportunities for domestic footballers. With three foreign players also permitted in a match, the total number of non-local players can rise to eight in the starting eleven.

As a result, five of the 10 top-tier BPL clubs signed 11 players from South Asian nations in the first phase of the league. A further 10 players were signed by four clubs during the mid-season transfer window.

The decision has particularly benefited mid- and lower-table clubs operating on limited budgets, as they have been able to strengthen

their squads at a lower cost. However, it has made competition tougher for local players.

Following the student uprising in mid-2024, two established clubs – Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club and Sheikh Russel Krira Chakra – withdrew from the professional league, further reducing opportunities for players, as no additional teams were promoted to the top tier in their absence.

Top-tier clubs, including Bashundhara Kings, Abahani and Mohammedan, have also struggled financially. Kings and Abahani have faced multiple transfer bans from FIFA due to unpaid dues to foreign players, while local players have quietly accepted reduced wages over the past two seasons.

Although the number of foreign players allowed has been reduced to three in the ongoing season, the inclusion of five South Asian footballers as local players has further compounded the challenges faced by domestic footballers.

Dembele, Simeone stamp their authorities



Ousmane Dembele struck twice as defending champions PSG sealed a place in the Champions League semifinals with a 2-0 win over Liverpool at Anfield on Tuesday, completing a 4-0 aggregate win. In the other fixture, Atletico Madrid advanced to the last four despite a 2-1 home defeat (3-2 aggregate win) to Barcelona. The result preserved coach Diego Simeone's remarkable home knockout record in the competition -- 11 wins and six draws. Their only 'home' defeat under Simeone came against Chelsea in 2021 -- a tie played in Romania due to Covid restrictions.

