

Bangladesh eye another final amid personal tragedy

ANISUR RAHMAN *from Goa*

Bangladesh's preparations for today's SAFF Women's Championship semifinal against Nepal have been overshadowed by personal tragedy, as the team attempt to overcome the emotional impact of the death of defender Sheuli Azim's mother.

The match is scheduled to kick off at 4:30pm (Bangladesh time) at the Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Goa. Hosts and favourites India will face Bhutan in the second semifinal later in the evening at the same venue.

The death of Bashona Azim, Sheuli's mother, in the early hours of Tuesday left the Bangladesh camp devastated. The team cancelled its scheduled training session at the Bambolim Athletics Stadium as several players struggled to cope with the heartbreaking news.

Many members of the squad share close personal ties with Sheuli, particularly players from Mymensingh's Dhobaura upazila, including captain Maria Manda, Shamsunnahar Jr, Shamsunnahar Sr and Tohura Khatun. Senior teammates such as Monika Chakma were also visibly affected, with several



players breaking down in tears. As a result, the coaching staff shifted their focus from tactical preparation to supporting the players emotionally ahead of one of their most important matches of the tournament. The cancellation of training meant Bangladesh were unable to work on the shortcomings exposed during their group-stage defeat to India. Despite skipping on-field activities, the players completed other recovery and preparation routines, including ice baths, video analysis sessions and a one-hour walk along the beach in an effort to clear their minds and regain focus. Head coach Peter Butler expressed

his condolences to Sheuli and her family while urging his players to channel their emotions positively. "We haven't kicked a ball today, but I don't think that puts us at a disadvantage," Butler said in a video message. "It gives everybody a little bit of time to think about what's happened and realise sometimes life can be short and cruel." The British coach believes the squad possesses the mental strength to respond positively in difficult circumstances. "I said to the girls that the most important thing is to approach the match with a positive mindset and turn negative energy into positive energy," Butler said. "That's not easy, but I believe this group is capable of putting in a strong performance and getting the result we need." Bangladesh will take confidence from their recent record against Nepal, having defeated the six-time runners-up in the finals of the previous two editions. Now, with a place in another final at stake, the defending champions will hope to honour their teammate by producing a performance worthy of the occasion.



PHOTO: FACEBOOK

CR7 reports for duty

It is hard not to get excited about a Portugal squad brimming with talent as the 2026 FIFA World Cup approaches. The Selecao welcomed talisman Cristiano Ronaldo to their camp in Lisbon yesterday, where the bulk of the squad -- minus the PSG contingent -- held their first training session. The 41-year-old, international football's all-time leading scorer and a five-time Ballon d'Or winner, is preparing for a joint-record sixth World Cup appearance in pursuit of the one major trophy that has eluded him. Fresh from winning his first league title with Saudi Pro League side Al Nassr, Ronaldo appears as hungry as ever and, arguably, has the strongest supporting cast of his career around him. Before training, midfielder Ruben Neves underlined the ambition within the camp. "We are a young group, but very experienced. It is an extremely difficult competition, but our goal is undoubtedly to reach the final and win the World Cup," said the Al Hilal midfielder. Drawn in Group K alongside Colombia, Uzbekistan and DR Congo, Portugal will warm up with home friendlies against Chile on June 6 and Nigeria on June 10 before opening their World Cup campaign against Congo on June 17.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

FIFTY IN 15

Legends of Rupganj opener Habibur Rahman Sohan smashed a 15-ball half-century against Mohammedan Sporting Club at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium yesterday, equalling the record for the fastest fifty in Bangladesh's List A cricket, jointly held by Parvez Hossain Emon. The right-hander eventually blazed 59 off just 27 balls, striking six fours and five sixes, and briefly put Rupganj on course for a remarkable chase. However, after Mohammedan posted a daunting 339 for five, Sohan's fireworks proved a lone bright spot as Rupganj collapsed and were eventually bowled out for 232.

Hridoy hits right notes ahead of Australia test

SPORTS REPORTER

Tawhid Hridoy headlined an action-packed, high-scoring day in the Dhaka Premier League yesterday, with the Mohammedan Sporting Club skipper smashing his fifth List A century to keep his side atop the table. The right-hander smashed a 106-ball 101 which powered Mohammedan to a 107-run win over Legends of Rupganj at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur. Last season, Hridoy came under fire for controversial remarks about umpiring that led to sanctions. But a more composed cricketer appears to have emerged from that episode, with his latest century lifting him to second on the DPL's run-scorers' chart. Batting at No. 3, Hridoy has found a natural rhythm despite largely being confined to a middle-order role, usually at No. 5, for Bangladesh. In the DPL this season, he has amassed 427 runs at an average of 71 and a strike rate of 117.3. With the ODI series against Australia beginning in Mirpur on June 9 and similar sporting surfaces expected, Bangladesh will hope one of their key middle-order batters can carry that form into international cricket.

This was no routine DPL run-fest against an ordinary attack. Hridoy's ton came against a Rupganj bowling unit featuring Bangladesh pacers Shoriful Islam and Hasan Mahmud, alongside a formidable spin trio of Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Mahedi Hasan and Nasum Ahmed.



Bangladesh's middle order has struggled for consistency in ODIs, with even Litton Das recently shifting into that role. Hridoy, however, has enjoyed a productive year, averaging 97 across five ODIs against New Zealand and Pakistan, including several unbeaten innings. With ODI cricket increasingly becoming a format of imposing totals, Mohammedan's 339 for five on Tuesday offered a glimpse of the blueprint Hridoy believes Bangladesh should follow against Australia. "Although Australia are a big name, if you look at our performances at home in recent series, not only in ODIs but other formats as well, we have dominated and performed as a team. Obviously there will be challenges, but to post big totals, runs have to come from the top order. We won't get runs from the top every day, so on those occasions the middle order will have to take responsibility," he said. Recent numbers may support a promotion up the order, but Hridoy is not lobbying for one. "I don't want to say that. I serve according to the team's demands. The decision belongs to the captain and team management. So I don't keep expectations regarding a promotion up the order. It's the team's call," he concluded.

Iran embarks on unusual World Cup journey

AFP, TEHRAN

Iran's football team will leave for Spain this weekend en route to their World Cup base in Mexico despite still awaiting visas, the head of the country's football federation said. The 2026 World Cup is being hosted jointly by the United States, Mexico and Canada. Neither the United States, where Iran will play their three group stage matches, nor Mexico, where the team will be based throughout the tournament, have yet issued visas for the players. "We will leave for Spain on Saturday, and from there the team will go directly to Tijuana in Mexico," football federation chief Mehdi Taj said on Monday on a sports programme broadcast on state television. Iran have been drawn in Group G and will play New Zealand and Belgium in Los Angeles on June 15 and 21, followed by a game against Egypt in Seattle on June 26. Taj said that the outbreak of the Middle East war on February 28, when the United States and Israel attacked Iran, "changed everything" for Team Meli. "We had arranged good warm-up matches, including one against Spain [in February], which was cancelled." The Iranians relocated their World Cup base, which initially was planned to be in Tucson in the US state of Arizona, to the northwestern Mexican border city of Tijuana due to tensions over the Middle East war. Iran are currently preparing for the tournament in Turkey. On Friday they beat Gambia 3-1 in a friendly in Antalya, where they will play another warm-up match against Mali on Thursday. Taj complained the team's World Cup preparations had been also dogged by "financial difficulties" due to the economic crisis and the sharp depreciation of the rial against the dollar.

Dempo and the structural Goan gospel

ANISUR RAHMAN *from Goa*

At the stroke of the millennium, India forward Bruno Coutinho broke millions of Bangladeshi hearts by opening the scoring in the maiden 1999 SAFF Cup final at Goa's Fatorda Stadium. Just seven years ago, it was defender Adil Khan denying Bangladesh a historic victory over India with an 88th-minute equaliser in a FIFA World Cup qualifying fixture in Kolkata. The connection? Both Coutinho and Adil hail from Goa -- the sun-soaked coastal state currently hosting the SAFF Women's Championship, and a historical breeding ground that has gifted players like Climax Lawrence, Clifford Miranda, Brahmanand Sankhwalkar, Neville D'Souza, Menino Figueiredo, Liston Colaco, Rowlin Borges, Mahesh Gawli, Denzil Franco, Mandar Rao Dessai and numerous others who have worn the Indian jersey. Goa's football roots stretch back to Portuguese colonial rule, which lasted until 1961, and its influence was not limited to architecture and religion. To understand how this tiny region stitched football into its social fabric and sustained such a player pipeline, one must leave the tourist beaches behind. Waking up early yesterday, this correspondent embarked on a 50-kilometre journey from the team hotel in Margao to Old Goa, navigating the oppressive heat and humidity that seemed to nullify the Arabian Sea breeze.



The destination was Dempo Sports Club, established in 1967. What lies there provides a stark, sobering contrast to how professional football clubs operate back home in Bangladesh.

The hidden oasis of Old Goa

The initial reception at the gates was strict; a club employee initially refused access to the inner sanctum. However, after a quick coordination with local journalist Rahul Chandawarkar, Dempo's general secretary, Lector Mascarenhas, graciously opened the doors. The entrance to the Dempo Residential Football Academy does not immediately announce itself as one of India's most

respected football institutions. Beyond a stone-studded pathway stand a three-storey administrative-cum-residential building, lush green pitches and another ground under construction. Under the scorching sun, curators continue their work while academy players move through their routines. Inside the club offices, Adil Khan and Climax Lawrence could be seen attending an AFC 'A' diploma coaching course organised by the club. Despite having made history in 2008 by becoming the first Indian club to reach the AFC Cup semifinals and boasting nearly 70 domestic silverwares, Dempo are no longer in their golden era, devolving into a mid-table



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

side in the I-League. "Goa football is not the same as before," Lector Mascarenhas told The Daily Star, reflecting honestly on the shifting tides of Indian football. "From the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 21st century, the top clubs -- Dempo, Salgaocar, Churchill Brothers, Sporting Clube de Goa -- were very popular. "Dempo won five [top-tier] league titles, which no other club has done. Dempo will complete 60 years next year; it's a legacy club of Goa," he added. That legacy is now fuelled by structural continuity rather than just big-money senior signings. Dempo runs a fully functioning

pyramid of five distinct age group teams: U-14, U-16, U-18, U-20, and U-21. **The blueprint Bangladesh needs** Back in Bangladesh where professional clubs like Abahani, Mohammedan Sporting Club and Bashundhara Kings often list youth development on paper, Dempo -- the second oldest club in Goa -- operates in a completely different dimension. "Around 150 boys train daily at the academy under highly qualified coaches," Lector explained. "We start from under-14 and go all the way up. We have a team playing in the Goa Football Professional League, and then the senior team. This pathway is in place from age 14 onwards. The talented boys end up here." Every single age group is backed by certified assistant coaches, managers, physios, training facilities, and a full-fledged gym. "But our residential programme is catered to under-16 to under-18 boys," Lector added, highlighting the club's long-term vision. This patience stems directly from the top. Club chairman Srinivas Dempo, who also heads the massive Dempo Group that finances the entire operation, possesses a distinct "passion and vision" to develop Goan players. While Bangladesh football continues searching for sustainable development models, the answer may not lie in grand promises. It may lie along a quiet road in Old Goa, where one club continues to invest in what comes next.