DHAKA WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 4, 2026, KARTIK 19, 1433 BS

SPORT



Bangladesh are the strongest team in the tournament right now. I don't know when I will meet them, but I hope to see them in the final.

NAUSHAD MOOSA,
India football team head coach





Bangladesh and Bhutan are gearing up for their SAFF Championship 2026 opener, with both sides training at the ABG Sports City training ground yesterday. Bhutan held their session in the morning, followed by Bangladesh in the afternoon. Bhutan arrived a day earlier, while India and Sri Lanka landed yesterday to participate in the tournament. PHOTO: BFF / FACEBOOK

SAFF at the door, but build-up falls flat

SPORTS REPORTER

With just one day to go before kick-off, the region's biggest football tournament, the SAFF Championship, is yet to generate the excitement it deserves, with organisational confusion and a lack of publicity threatening to overshadow the occasion.

Fondly dubbed the 'South Asian World Cup', the tournament is just around the corner, with all participating teams except Maldives having reached Dhaka. The six-nation competition gets underway tomorrow with a high-stakes India-Pakistan opener before hosts Bangladesh face Bhutan. Yet it is hard to believe that the region's biggest football show is about to take place in the capital. Dhaka appears largely indifferent, with little sign of the excitement that usually accompanies a major regional tournament.

Unlike the previous three SAFF Championships held in Dhaka, in 2003, 2009 and 2018, when Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) went to considerable lengths to build anticipation -- putting up festive decorations, billboards and banners -- there is little sign of promotional activity this time.



BFF is providing logistical support to South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) secretariat, which is organising the six-team senior men's tournament in Dhaka for the first time. However, an apparent lack of coordination between the two bodies has left media professionals struggling to obtain essential information.

"There is no shortage of communication between the BFF and SAFF, and there is no confusion," BFF president Tabith Awal told reporters at the BFF headquarters following a reception for the Bangladesh U-15 team, who recently finished runners-up in the E tier of the FIFA U-15 World Cup and Festival in Azerbaijan.

While stressing that SAFF carries the primary responsibility as host, Tabith said BFF had a "moral and legal obligation" to support the regional body. Yet he admitted that the build-up had fallen short of expectations.

"Of course, I am also disappointed with the organisational side of the tournament. The kind of hype we expected around the SAFF Championship has not been seen yet. But I think the excitement will grow as the tournament progresses," he said.

Bhutan arrived on Monday, followed by Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan yesterday. However, neither SAFF nor the BFF provided timely information about the teams or photographs of their arrivals. A BFF executive blamed SAFF, saying the federation had requested a photographer from the regional body to cover the arrivals but was still waiting.



"We could have sent our own photographer, but SAFF would not pay him. So why should our photographer work for them?" said the BFF executive.

India arrived with 19 players from their 23-member squad and five members of the coaching staff, but the information had to be obtained directly from the team. Organisers had also failed to provide training schedules and venues by yesterday.

Meanwhile, two match commissioners, from Bhutan and India, have arrived, while referees and assistant referees from Vietnam, Indonesia and Oman were expected last night. A referee assessor and an assistant referee from Thailand had even contacted the SAFF secretariat on Monday to arrange their Bangladeshi visas, raising questions about how well the organisers had prepared.

Despite the organisational shortcomings, hosts Bangladesh are dreaming of reclaiming the title after 23 years. Yet the national team have been kept away from the media for six consecutive days, until yesterday, leaving journalists without the latest updates.

"Since winning the SAFF Championship in 2003, Bangladesh have always tried to win the title, and the players have given their best, but unfortunately, we have not been able to do so," Tabith said.

"This time, however, we are overconfident that we will win the SAFF title, and people will see the winning mentality of the players from the very first match."

The BFF boss acknowledged the difficulty of arranging practice matches outside the FIFA international window but believes three to four domestic league matches would provide sufficient preparation.

"Playing practice matches was not so important. What matters more is performing together during matches," he said, expressing confidence that Bangladesh would play before a full house despite limited interest in buying high-priced tickets.

The tournament may yet gather momentum once the action begins, but the organisers have already lost valuable time building a connection with the public. For a competition billed as South Asia's biggest football event, leaving the host city largely unmoved on the eve of kick-off is a poor start.



DIOMANDE RAISES THE BAR FOR VINI

Yan Diomande leads the charge during practice as Real Madrid prepare for tonight's away Champions League clash against AEK Athens. Jose Mourinho's side are on a roll, having won their last six matches across competitions since a 2-1 away defeat to Atletico Madrid in LaLiga before the September international break. Diomande has been instrumental in that run, scoring four goals and providing three assists while stepping up in Vinicius Junior's absence as the Brazilian continues to serve a five-match LaLiga ban following his red card against Villarreal in Real's first game after the break. With Vinicius available again for tonight's encounter, Diomande could be shifted to the right wing, allowing the Brazilian to return to his preferred left flank, with Kylian Mbappe leading the attack. The pressure, however, will be on Vinicius to rediscover his best form and convince Mourinho that he deserves to reclaim his place in the starting XI. PHOTO: REAL MADRID

WHAT TO WATCH

SONY SPORTS 1,2,3,5
New Zealand vs India
1st ODI
Live from 8:00 am
Champions League
Fenerbahche vs Liverpool
Live from 11:45 pm

AEK Athens vs Real Madrid
Live from 11:45 pm
Live from 2:00 am (Thursday):
Slavia Praha vs Arsenal
Leipzig vs Man City
Dortmund vs Real Betis
Porto vs Napoli

Bangladesh ready to ditch spin-first approach

SPORTS REPORTER

After their plan to outspin West Indies on a spin-friendly Mirpur wicket backfired last week, Bangladesh are considering a change of approach for the second Test in Sylhet, starting tomorrow.

Both teams held their first training sessions at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday, having arrived in the city a day earlier. The players also took a close look at the greenish wicket and spoke to head curator Tony Hemming to assess its nature. With a day still to go before the Test, however, the hosts could yet make a late adjustment, as they did ahead of the opening match.

Traditionally, Sylhet has produced sporting wickets, offering early assistance to pacers before bringing spinners into the game as matches progress.

Bangladesh have played six Tests at the venue, winning three and losing three. Two of those defeats came against Zimbabwe, in 2018 and 2025.

The Tigers, however, have enjoyed convincing victories in their last two Tests at the venue, against Pakistan and Ireland, on sporting wickets. Their batters also played key roles in those wins, adding to the appeal of a surface that could bring the best out of the hosts.

In Mirpur, Bangladesh's spinners were outplayed by their West Indies counterparts, with the visitors claiming 16 wickets through spin compared to just eight for the hosts' trio.



PHOTO: BCB

The batters offered little support either, managing 272 in the first innings and 142 in the second in an eight-wicket defeat that left Bangladesh's bowlers with too little to defend in the fourth innings.

The team management are now considering a change of strategy for Sylhet, potentially moving away from a spin-friendly approach towards the kind of sporting surface traditionally seen at the venue. The idea is to give the pacers a greater role while offering the batters better conditions to post competitive totals and the bowlers something to defend.

"An all-out spin attack won't help us because we don't play spin all that well either. In fact, over the last few seasons, we won matches on sporting wickets with pace bowling," a member of the national selection panel told The Daily Star on Tuesday.

The selector, however, acknowledged that the West Indies also boast a formidable pace attack, featuring Kemar Roach, Shamar Joseph, Jayden Seales and Justin Greaves.

"It won't be easy -- they also have good fast bowlers. If Nahid Rana was with us, we could have gone into the match without tension with our pace attack," he added.

Bangladesh could also receive a boost with Mushfiqur Rahim set to return after missing the opening Test due to a finger injury. His return could see skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto move up to number three, followed by Tawhid Hridoy, Mushfiqur and Litton Das.

There is also a strong possibility of Bangladesh fielding an extra pacer, with either Ebadot Hossain or Taskin Ahmed potentially coming into the side at the expense of a spinner.

With the series on the line, the hosts can ill afford another miscalculation.