

KAZAKHSTAN BIATHLETES ANGRY DESPITE WINNING ASIAN TITLES

SAPPORO: Kazakhstan's top biathletes lashed out at Austrian authorities yesterday over a doping raid which they said made them feel like criminals.

Kazakhstan won two gold medals in biathlon in Japan yesterday, but athletes said their celebrations were dampened by their experience a week earlier, when they were investigated and cleared of doping at the world titles at the Alpine resort of Hochfilzen.

Austrian police raided the Kazakh team on February 8, seizing medical products, medicines and portable telephones and taking blood and urine samples from 10 athletes. The tests came back negative and the

International Biathlon Union (IBU) said it was not considering any disciplinary action, but competitors say they are still aggrieved by the events. Galina Vishnevskaya, who won the women's 7.5 kilometre sprint at the Asian Winter Games Thursday, said the Austrian police's actions had ruined her chances of doing well at the world championships.

The 23-year-old only managed 86th place in Austria, despite having just won two gold medals at the World University Games in Almaty. "This awful situation with doping suspicion got me completely out," she said. "It is very frustrating when you are treated like a criminal without any justification."

Austrian police said they carried out the raids after seizing doping-related material from a van that was found to belong to the Kazakh team. The Kazakh team has strongly denied any suggestions of wrongdoing.

The Kazakhstan National Biathlon Federation said there was "absolutely no surprise" that the athletes were cleared of doping when the tests came back negative, but Vishnevskaya said the damage had already been done.

"We are clean, it was proved, but we got a very unpleasant experience of being judged without a single justification. This is not the way it should work," she said.

Yan Savitskiy finished 24th in the men's

10km sprint at the world championship in Austria and said the team was "exhausted after the World Championships in Hochfilzen". "Lots of work was given to participating at the world championships, plus the stressful days with seizures and interviews," he said. "We still did not get back our belongings and it is disturbing." Savitskiy won the Asian title, beating his teammate Vassiliy Podkorytov as Kazakhstan took gold and silver. Biathlon, a winter sport that combines cross-country skiing and rifle shooting, is already under a cloud following revelations of Russian doping and the decision to strip Russia of hosting rights for the next world championships.—AFP

RUGBY

JOHN BARCLAY TO CAPTAIN SCOTLAND AGAINST WALES

LONDON: John Barclay will replace the injured Greig Laidlaw as Scotland captain for Saturday's Six Nations international against Wales at Murrayfield, it was announced yesterday. Laidlaw was ruled out of the rest of the tournament after suffering an ankle injury that saw the scrum-half go off during the first half of Scotland's eventual 22-16 loss to France in Paris earlier this month. Back-row forward Barclay took over the captaincy at the Stade de France and the flanker also had to leave the field, with a shoulder and head injury, although he has since been passed fit.

The 30-year-old Barclay, who plays his club rugby in Wales for the Llanelli-based Scarlets, has been the official Scotland captain once before when standing in for the injured Mike Blair against New Zealand in 2010. "John has played a vital role in our leadership group and has led by example throughout this and previous campaigns," said Scotland coach Vern Cotter yesterday.

"It was disappointing to lose Greig (Laidlaw) however we continue to develop a system of shared leadership in this squad, which has supported this transition.

"It'll be a proud moment for John and one which he thoroughly deserves." Cotter has made five changes to his side, with three enforced through injury.

Laidlaw's place will be taken by Ali Price, who came off the bench in Paris, with the Glasgow scrum-half set to make his first Test start this weekend.

The absence of Laidlaw, also Scotland's first-choice goal-kicker, was described as a "massive loss" by Wales scrum-half Rhys Webb on Wednesday. Finn Russell is now set to take over the kicking duties, having somehow missed a conversion from in front of the posts when Laidlaw was off the field in Paris, although the Scotland fly-half did kick two penalties.

'ATTACKING MINDSET'

Elsewhere in the backs, wing Tim Visser replaces Sean Maitland (rib injury), while back-row forward Ryan Wilson, recovered from the elbow infection that saw him miss the France game, comes in for the injured Josh Strauss (kidney).

Cotter has made two tactical changes in the pack, with back-row John Hardie and prop Gordon Reid respectively in for Hamish Watson and Allan Dell, who both drop down to the bench after starting Scotland's opening two matches of the Championship.

The Gray brothers, Jonny and Richie, continue as Scotland's second-row pair. "We've now had two weeks to recover, reflect and prepare a new game plan for Wales," said Cotter.

The New Zealander added: "We know the Welsh will throw everything at us but we will keep our attacking mind-set and look to convert pressure to points as often as possible. "It's a huge weekend in the championship and we're still right in the mix." Both Wales, who named their team on Wednesday, and Scotland do indeed remain in title contention after one win from two matches so far this Six Nations. The Welsh beat Italy 33-7 in Rome before losing 21-16 to England in Cardiff, while the Scots launched their campaign with a 27-22 win at home to Ireland. Wales, however, will head to Edinburgh seeking a 10th consecutive win over Scotland. They have not lost to Scotland since a 21-9 defeat in 2007, a run also featuring four successive victories at Murrayfield. — AFP



TOWCESTER: Mercedes AMG Petronas Formula One driver Lewis Hamilton drives during a launch event for the new 2017 season car at the Silverstone motor racing circuit near Towcester, central England yesterday.— AFP

FORMULA ONE

HAMILTON UNVEILS NEW MERCEDES W08 CAR

SILVERSTONE: Lewis Hamilton and his new Mercedes team-mate Valtteri Bottas unveiled the W08 car they will pilot in the 2017 Formula One season at Silverstone yesterday.

The new car has a black, silver and teal chassis and has been produced to meet new regulations intended to make F1 cars faster and more demanding to drive. Three-time champion Hamilton gave the car a spin amid blustery conditions at Silverstone, 80 miles (129 kilometres) northwest of London, before posing for pictures alongside Bottas.

"It is the most detailed piece of machinery I have seen in F1," Hamilton said. "This is not an actual test—it's just a few laps to make sure the car will run.

But I was able to go faster in the last couple of laps. "It feels almost identical to last year's car in terms of ergonomics, but you have this bigger, more powerful beast around you."

Briton Hamilton, 32, finished second in the last year's Drivers' Championship behind team-mate Nico Rosberg, who abruptly retired at the end of the season. Bottas, a 27-year-old Finn, has joined from Williams to succeed Rosberg. As well as the departure of Rosberg, Mercedes have also lost executive technical director Paddy Lowe, who is expected to join Williams, with James Allison set to arrive from Ferrari to take his place. But executive director Toto Wolff believes the upheaval could be

positive. "Disruption can be a very positive factor in a company's development," Wolff told a press conference at Silverstone. "When Nico decided to call it a day, of course the initial information came as a surprise. But we quickly realised it provided an opportunity.

"Having Valtteri now in the car is an exciting opportunity for us. In terms of Paddy, it's a little bit the same. "You can either follow the concept of 'never change a winning team' or try to emphasise what's important for the future." Mercedes will be looking to secure a fourth successive Constructors' Championship when the 2017 season begins at the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on March 26. — AFP