

Sports

Afghanistan women taekwondo fighters feel defeated by Taleban

HERAT: Zarghunna Noori has always been a fighter, but the 22-year-old taekwondo champion - who dreamt of representing Afghanistan at the Olympics - says she has finally met her match. "In sports when we lose we are left feeling terrible," she told AFP at her home in the western city of Herat. "And now we have been defeated by the Taleban."

The Taleban's all-male government has shut down the ministry of women's affairs and replaced it with one that earned notoriety for enforcing religious doctrine during the hardliners' 1996-2001 stint in power. Although they have yet to publicize a formal policy on women in sport, the Taleban have made comments that indicate serious participation will be impossible.

With women and girls already effectively banned from work and school, fear of reprisal for practising sport is widespread. "All our lives have been overturned," said Noori, who since joining her provincial team a decade ago has become a national academy star, winning an Afghan title in 2018. "Each and every member of the national taekwondo team dreamed that one day we would make it to the Olympics and raise the Afghan flag in other countries, in international competitions," she said, surrounded by her medals and a golden trophy engraved 'Best Leader'. "But now we are all forced to stay home, and become more depressed with each passing day."

Taekwondo's popularity surged in Afghanistan in 2008 after local hero Rohullah Nikpai won bronze at the Beijing Olympics. Zakia Khudadadi, 22, gave Afghans another rea-

son to watch the Korean martial art last month when she competed in the Tokyo Paralympics.

Sport 'not necessary'

In Afghanistan, women have long faced open hostility to their involvement in sport and in rural areas it is extremely rare for them to participate. Even in cities, many women's leagues are at the fledgling stage. Around 130 girls and women aged 12-25 are members of a taekwondo gym in Herat, but they are not currently allowed to train and their ability to do so in the future looks bleak.

Last week, the country's new sports chief Bashir Ahmad Rustamzai said the Taleban would allow around 400 sports - but declined to say if women could participate in any of them. Ahmadullah Wasiq, of the Taleban's cultural commission, also raised alarm this month by saying it was "not necessary" for women to play sport. But the regime is under pressure: barring women from participating will likely halt recognition and funding from international sports bodies-including support for its popular cricket and football teams.

Desperate to train

For Noori, a fourth-year student of physical education at Kabul University, the Taleban's draconian interpretation of sharia law is personal. "Every woman in Afghanistan had a dream to be able to progress and reach a better place in the future," she said, standing alongside seven other members of the national taekwondo academy. "They all wanted to become role models... so that they could show the world how much we can progress. We all acted, practiced and tried our

The left-handed Dhawan leads the IPL batting chart with 422 runs including three half-centuries in nine matches. Delhi, who are still searching for their first IPL title, moved back to the top of the eight-team table. Hyderabad stay at the bottom with seven losses from eight matches. "We have one of the quickest bowlers in the world so I think they're great assets to have," Pant said of his team's pace duo of Nortje and Rabada.

Hyderabad, who are missing England star Jonny Bairstow, lost regular wickets after Australia's David Warner fell to Nortje without scoring on the third ball of the match. Bairstow was one of the many England and international stars including Ben Stokes and Pat Cummins of Australia to pull out of the pandemic-hit league. Nortje bowled express pace with one of his deliveries recorded at 151 kmph (93.8mph) and was ably supported by Rabada.

Left-arm spinner Axar Patel also kept down the opposition scoring and took two key wickets including skipper Kane Williamson for 18. Williamson called Nortje and Rabada "two of the best fast bowlers going around in world cricket". Marcus Stoinis bowled 1.1 overs before he went off the field with a strained hamstring and fellow Australian Steve Smith stood in as substitute fielder for the rest of the innings. The IPL only resumed Sunday in the United Arab Emirates after a five-month suspension because of a devastating surge in Covid-19 deaths in India. Teams returning to the event in the UAE have been put in strict bio bubbles. — AFP



HERAT: This picture taken on Sept 21, 2021 shows taekwondo champion Zarghunna Noori (center) speaking with other members of the national taekwondo academy at a house in Herat province. — AFP

best, but it has now come to nothing - all of it."

Noori said many young taekwondo athletes are now in hiding, and that when they do leave their homes, they cover themselves from head-to-toe in a burqa. The athlete is desperate to go back to training, she said, so that "ten years of hard work will not go to waste", but now feels she will be forced to leave Afghanistan. "No one who lives in their own country wants to ever leave it," she told AFP. "But the conditions are such that we don't see common ground that will allow us to progress; it doesn't exist in the country."

'Help us'

Noori called on the global sporting community to help, because "if we raise our own voices in Afghanistan, our voices will be cut off". "We ask all international, Olympic athletes and members of the Olympic Committee to help us so that we can get to a better place, even if it means to go to another country to continue our activities," she said. Zahra, 22, another member of the national team, also feels "helpless". "Even the men don't have all their freedoms," she said, adding the Taleban were "the same Taleban of the past". — AFP

Delhi thrash Hyderabad in COVID-hit IPL match

DUBAI: South African bowlers Anrich Nortje and Kagiso Rabada helped set up an eight-wicket win for Delhi Capitals on Wednesday in an Indian Premier League match that went ahead despite a Sunrisers Hyderabad player testing positive for coronavirus. Hyderabad left-arm quick Thangarasu Natarajan and six of his close contacts were isolated hours before the latest match in the Twenty20 tournament in Dubai.

An IPL release said Natarajan is "currently asymptomatic" while the contacts and other Hyderabad players all returned negative tests. On the field, Nortje returned figures of 2-12 and fellow Proteas quick Rabada took three wickets to further hurt Hyderabad who managed just 134-9 after electing to bat. Shikhar Dhawan lay the foundations for Delhi's chase with his brisk 42 and then Shreyas Iyer (47) and skipper Rishabh Pant (35) took the team home in 17.5 overs with an unbeaten stand of 67 for the third wicket.

Italian football club Genoa sold to US investment firm

MILAN: Genoa announced yesterday they have been bought by American private equity fund 777 Partners for a reported €150 million (\$175 million) as Italian businessman Enrico Preziosi ends his 18-year ownership of Italy's oldest football club. "The new owner group, which will acquire 99.9 percent of Genoa's share capital, will pay new capital into the club and will assume some related liabilities," the statement said.

"The previous owner, Enrico Preziosi, will remain on the board of directors, while CEO Alessandro Zarboni will continue to manage the day-to-day operations of the club," it added. Preziosi, 73, took over Genoa, who were founded by Englishmen in 1893 as a cricket and athletics club, in 2003 with the nine-time Italian champions in the hands of liquidators.

Genoa fans have had little to cheer about since Preziosi's arrival though, winning no trophies and only finishing in the top 10 once in the past 10 seasons. When they did, taking

sixth place in 2015, they were denied a place in the Europa League as they were unable to obtain a UEFA license from the Italian Football Federation. Their place was given to their local rivals Sampdoria, who finished seventh.

They even spent one season in the third-tier Serie C1 early in Preziosi's tenure, when their 2005 promotion to Serie A was cancelled and they were relegated after authorities found evidence of fixing of their final game of the campaign against Venezia, won 3-2 by Genoa. The scandal was to become infamous in Italy as a few days after the game, which Genoa needed to win to assure themselves of a place in Italy's top flight, Venezia director Giuseppe Pagliari was stopped by police near the headquarters of Preziosi's toy company with a suitcase containing 250,000 euros in cash.

777, who reportedly hold a stake in La Liga side Sevilla, are a private investment firm based in Miami. They invest in six broad industries: insurance, consumer and commercial finance, litigation finance, direct lending, media and entertainment and aviation. "We understand and respect the responsibility we are inheriting, we want to preserve and protect the proud Rossoblu heritage by aiming for the best possible positions in Serie A," 777 founder Josh Wander said. — AFP