

Sports

India-Pak boycott threat looms over cricket's global showpiece

NEW DELHI: Border tensions between India and Pakistan are casting a cloud over this year's cricket World Cup with the threat of a boycott hanging over their highly-anticipated clash in England. There have been calls for India to forfeit their June 16 match against Pakistan after a suicide bomb attack in Indian-administered Kashmir claimed by a militant group based in Pakistan in which 40 Indian troops died.

Tit-for-tat air strikes and an aerial dogfight followed, igniting fears of an all-out conflict, but the crisis appeared to ease when Pakistan returned an Indian pilot who was shot down and captured. But doubts remain over the fate of the group stage match in Manchester. The ball rests firmly with India's politicians, who are not likely to make any decision until nearer the match, after cricketers and sports officials said they will abide by any government call for a boycott.

Vinod Rai, a senior official of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), told reporters after the Kashmir attack that they had written to the International Cricket Council (ICC) to demand tough security at the World Cup, which begins in England and Wales on May 30. Rai confirmed a boycott decision would only be made at a later date — and after consulting the government. India captain Virat Kohli said the players would respect any instruction from the government or board. "Our stand is simple: we stick by what the nation wants to do and what the BCCI decides to do," Kohli told reporters. "That is basically our opinion. Whatever

the government and the board decide, we will go by that and we will respect that."

ICC involvement 'unlikely'

In the letter to the ICC, the BCCI urged "the cricketing community to sever ties with countries from which terrorism emanates". The Kashmir attack was claimed by the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed militant group, which India says operates as a proxy for Islamabad, a charge Pakistan denies. ESPNcricinfo.com senior editor Sharda Ugra believes the ICC are unlikely to get involved and the next move rests with the Indian government.

"I think they won't be able to get the ICC to take on any stand on it and I don't think the BCCI will say that we are not playing there," she told AFP. "It will have to be a government pressure on them to not play. June 16 is still many days off and politics can play any narrative it wants to suit itself." Opinions have differed among prominent figures in Indian cricket.

Former paceman Chetan Sharma told AFP that country comes first for him and he would prefer India giving up two points if need be. "It totally depends on what the government decides. As a sportsperson I must tell you that we are Indians first and then comes cricket," said Sharma. Asked what should happen if India drew Pakistan in the semi-finals or the final, Sharma said: "I would still say that it's the country and not the World Cup that is important."

India's greatest batsman Sachin Tendulkar



RANCHI: Indian cricketer Mahendra Singh Dhoni (2R) speaks with coach Ravi Shastri (R) during a training session ahead of the third one-day international (ODI) cricket match between India and Australia at the Jharkhand State Cricket Association International Cricket Stadium. —AFP

tweeted he would "hate" to hand Pakistan two points by forfeiting the game, but added, "India always comes first, so whatever my country decides, I will back with all my heart." Former India spin bowler Harbhajan Singh was vociferous in calling for a boycott. "I don't care about losing points as the Indian team is powerful enough to win the World Cup without playing Pakistan,"

said Singh, who took 417 Test wickets.

At the last World Cup in England in 1999, India and Pakistan played in Manchester during the two countries' last conflict. A boycott would be costly for organizers. The match is one of the hottest tickets at the World Cup, which begins on May 30, with demand so far outstripping that for the final, according to ICC officials. —AFP

All Black Coles fumes over Rugby scheme

WELLINGTON: All Blacks hooker Dane Coles slammed World Rugby yesterday for failing to consult players or Pacific island teams about plans to revamp the international Test match schedule. Coles said he was "pissed off" at the governing body for not listening to Pacific island nations and players as it drafted plans for a 'Nations Championship' competition. "The thing that got me was excluding the Pacific nation teams because especially in the (Wellington) Hurricanes we've had a lot of guys play for Manu Samoa and Tonga," said the 60-Test All Black ahead of the Super Rugby team's clash with Otago Highlanders today. "Those countries do a lot for world rugby, so them not being included in any plans was what pissed me off."

Reports last week said World Rugby was looking at a 12-nation competition which would not include Pacific island nations such as Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. World Rugby moved to clarify the plans this week, insisting there had always been a promotion-relegation element to the proposals which would give Pacific nations a pathway to the top tier. But Coles remained unimpressed. "Those Pacific nations deserve something, they deserve games and stuff like that," he said. "It's a long way to go and a lot more planning. The players are trying to put their voice out there and get something going because you can't just have these guys at World Rugby making these decisions and not having the players' input."

Super Rugby has also faced criticism for excluding Pacific nations, even though they are a major source of playing talent in the southern hemisphere. A proposal for a Pacific islands Super Rugby team was scrapped late last year after organizers decided it was not commercially viable. —AFP

New Zealand look to win 'whatever way possible'

WELLINGTON: New Zealand have pledged a win-at-all-costs approach to the second Test against Bangladesh, starting in Wellington today, as they look to wrap up the series with a game to spare. The wicket is green and tailor-made for the early seamers, with New Zealand promising to continue with their short-ball tactic when it flattens out.

"We're looking to win the Test match in whatever way possible. Whatever gives us the best chance that is what we will do," New Zealand opener Tom Latham declared yesterday. Bangladesh, meanwhile, faced further injury concerns to an already fragile batting line-up with Tamim Iqbal under a cloud and Mushfiqur Rahim unlikely to be fit. Captain Mahmudullah described Tamim's issue as "a slight niggle" and accepted that "injury is part of the game".

Although neither side has named their match XV, Mahmudullah indicated Bangladesh would make changes given the color of the wicket and how expensive spinner Mehidy Hasan proved in the first Test. "We are yet to decide but we are thinking of picking four pace bowlers, given the conditions," he said. "If you remember, the 2017 wicket was greenish early on too. Batsmen will find it difficult on the first day. There'll be seam movement and swing."

In the Wellington Test two years ago, Bangladesh sur-

prised after being sent into bat with a first innings of 595 for eight declared, only to eventually lose by seven wickets. Latham, a century-maker in that match, is enjoying another purple home patch with a Test average of more than 200 from three centuries, including an unbeaten 264 in the rain-affected Wellington Test against Sri Lanka.

Short-ball barrage

Rain is again expected Friday morning, but with fine weather forecast for the remainder of the Test. Despite the Basin Reserve's bowl-first reputation, Latham had confidence even if New Zealand lose the toss and are put into bat. "It does look a little bit greener and with a little bit more grass on it (than previously) so, regardless of what the surface plays like it's about us trying to adapt to that surface as quick as possible," Latham said.

"If we are asked to bat it will be a challenge. We haven't batted first a huge amount this summer so if we do I'm certainly looking forward to doing that and taking that challenge on." Although New Zealand won the first Test comprehensively, they did struggle to take a wicket for a long period in the second innings as Soumya Sarkar and Mahmudullah delayed the end with a courageous 235-run stand for the fifth wicket. New Zealand bowling spearhead Trent Boult, who took 10 for 80 against the West Indies in Wellington six years ago, was determined that should not happen again.

"We need to find a way to take wickets and we feel we have the ability in the group to do it," he said, adding the short-ball barrage remained an effective tactic when there was no swing. "You're not left with many other options. We have Wags (Neil Wagner) who is an expert at being able to execute that plan. It's been pretty effective for us so expect it will be more of the same." —AFP