

ITF agrees to Indian demand, Davis Cup moved out of Pakistan

NITIN SHARMA

CHANDIGARH, NOVEMBER 4

THE INTERNATIONAL Tennis Federation (ITF) has made a decision and announced that India's upcoming Group 1 Asia/Oceania Davis Cup tie against Pakistan, originally scheduled to be held in Islamabad, will now be organised at a neutral venue. "Following a review of the latest advice given by the ITF's independent security advisors, the Davis Cup Committee has taken the decision that the Davis Cup Asia/Oceania Group I tie between Pakistan and India on 29-30 November 2019, must be played at a neutral venue," the ITF said in a statement.

"The ITF and Davis Cup Committee's first priority has always been the safety of athletes, officials and spectators and the decision was made on this basis. As per the Davis Cup Regulations, the Pakistan Tennis Federation now has the choice to nominate a neutral venue and has five working days to confirm their proposed venue. The venue will be announced once the choice has been submitted and approved."

Earlier last week, the Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports Kiren Rijiju, at *The Indian Express Idea Exchange*, had asserted that a decision to play a tie against Pakistan must be taken based on national sentiment.

"We are taking decisions in such a way that the sentiment of our country is maintained. At the same time we will also take into account (the rules) of international bodies so that it does not lead to an ugly situation... We will take a balanced stand on such issues," he had said.

The ITF though has made clear that the tie will no longer happen in Pakistan.

The draw for the zonal clash was made back in February this year, and the tie was originally scheduled to take place in September. India had named a strong team at the time, however, the downgrading of relations between the two countries following the Kashmir issue in August prompted the Indian players to write to the AITA asking for the tie to be shifted out of Pakistan.

The national body in turn wrote to the ITF asking for a shift to a neutral venue or delaying the tie by two months. The ITF, despite initially rejecting both pleas, decided to shift the tie to November 29-30, but the venue decision was to take place following the world body's inspection on November 4.

In October, the AITA, at the behest of the players again wrote to the ITF this time asking for a neutral venue. Late on Monday the ITF declared that the tie will be shifted out of Pakistan. "The decision is a positive thing for Indian tennis," said AITA secretary general Hironmoy Chatterjee to *The Indian Express*.

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ITF STATEMENT

"Since Pakistan is the host, they will decide in five days about where to hold the tie. The dates of the tie will be the same and the Indian team will be finalised in a day or two and preparations will start."

Hours before the ITF's decision came through, the AITA announced that the chairman of the selection committee and former Davis Cupper Rohit Rajpal will serve as non-playing captain for the Indian team for this tie in place of regular captain Mahesh Bhupathi.

The 12-time Grand Slam champion, who was appointed non-playing captain in 2017, along with players Rohan Bopanna, Sumit Nagal and Ramkumar Ramanathan had made themselves unavailable for the tie should it take place in Pakistan, due to security concerns,

while Prajnesh Gunneswaran and Divij Sharan were unavailable due to family reasons. As a result, the AITA made a new list of players who made themselves available for the tie, which included veteran Leander Paes.

But with the tie now not being held in Pakistan, the AITA asserts it will check with all the players about their willingness to play at the neutral venue and then select a team.

"Prajnesh and Divij had opted out of the tie due to family reasons, and regarding the other three players namely Sumit, Ramkumar, and Rohan, the committee will meet and take the decision. We will discuss with the players too and their concerns. Regarding Mahesh, the captain has been already been decided for this tie and there will be no change in that," Chatterjee added.

The hosts are expected to submit their request for potential venue in the coming week. In the past, Pakistan has hosted Davis Cup matches in the likes of Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Turkey, due to a 12-year ban the ITF had imposed on them due to security reasons. The ban was lifted in 2017 and Pakistan had been hosting matches in Islamabad, where they were expected to organise the upcoming tie as well.

But the ITF has made the decision that what was to be India's first trip to Pakistan in 55 years for Davis Cup will not happen this time.



Davis Cup captain Rohit Rajpal (left) with AITA life president Anil Khanna at the CLTA premises in Chandigarh. Kamleshwar Singh

Yuvraj bats for players' association of active cricketers

SHAHID JUDGE

MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 4

YUVRAJ SINGH believes that Sourav Ganguly's appointment as BCCI president with usher in "great things for Indian cricket" and hopes his former captain will create a players' association comprising active cricketers.

"Cricket from the administration point of view and cricketer's point of view are two different things. Someone who has been a successful captain will run the game from a players' point of view where cricketer's concerns can be heard. I see great things happening to Indian cricket with Sourav as the president," he says. "We deserve it. Because there are a lot of times we have been asked to play cricket that we don't want to. We have to play with the pressure that if we don't play we will be thrown out," Yuvraj explains. "That pressure has to go off the players that even if they are tired or fatigued or carrying injuries, they have to play," he notes.

Yuvraj cites the example of Glenn Maxwell, who has taken a break from international cricket to deal with mental health issues and has got the backing of his board. "That support should be given to the players. We see outside India, if players are fatigued and tired mentally, like is the case with (Glenn) Maxwell, he has taken a break because he is feeling it. "Our players can't do that because they fear they may lose their place. So a players' association is important," the 2011 World Cup winner explains.

Player fatigue remains an ailment that has remained unchecked in Indian cricket and young cricketers have begun to speak on this issue. "Body is tired, I am fatigued mentally. But no one is going to say take rest, *Kisi ko kuch farak hi nahi pada*," 24-year-old Shreyas Iyer, a top-order batsman had told *The Indian Express*. "We are not machines. There is no one to tell that players don't get adequate rest. We are playing non-stop for two years. I am out of home for 300 days. Even if am in India, I am not home."

It's an issue that Yuvraj may have faced during a glittering career that saw him help India win the 2007 T20 World Cup and the 2011 World Cup. Since retiring from international cricket back in June, he's been taking sojourns abroad to play in franchise-based leagues. His latest endeavour is the Abu Dhabi T10 League, but he remains concerned about players vying for their position in the national team — just as he once did. Who would be batting at No.4 has been problem troubling the national team for months. It's an issue that the team has come nowhere close to solving. On September 29, Yuvraj replied in a tweet to Harbhajan Singh's post that the team doesn't "need a no.4." It was a comment made in jest, but one that he feels strongly about.

"It was a joke, but actually we need to find a number four and respect the number four batsman and give him a longer run," he says. "Every day someone is batting at that spot and we have some loose statements about him. After me it was (Ambati) Rayudu, who played for a whole year, then got dropped at the last minute, now Rishabh (Pant) played well at number four in one game and there are remarks about him that now he is not doing well. You are not going to get a No.4 batsman by criticizing or dropping him... you have to support these young guys whether it is Rishabh, Shreyas or others. In between, there was Vijay Shankar '360 degree player', now he has vanished. You play him and then remove him. How can you groom players this way? You cannot produce players by giving them just three or four innings, you have to give somebody a longer run."

The problem, in Yuvraj's views, stems from the way the selectors have been handling the team, and the only way to change it is to appoint a new selection panel with an updated look on the game. "We do need better selectors, for sure. It's a difficult job but their thinking in terms of modern-day cricket is not up to the mark," he adds. "It's my opinion. I am always in favour of protecting the players and being positive about them. By talking negative about your players and team doesn't show you in true light. We definitely need better selectors."

Can Dhoni replace Pant?

Top BCCI official says he needs to play domestic cricket; Jharkhand secretary says, 'I don't have any information'

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY & VISHAL MENON

KOLKATA, NEW DELHI NOVEMBER 4

ROHIT SHARMA facepalmed after another DRS howler during Bangladesh's run-chase and the fans at Feroz Shah Kotla started to jeer Rishabh Pant with 'Dhoni, Dhoni' chants. Never mind that it was Pant's home ground, but every time he fails, the clamour to bring back MS Dhoni grows in the stands and on social media. *The Indian Express*, however, understands that if the former India captain wants to return to the international fold, he will have to play domestic cricket first.

"Yes, if he (Dhoni) wants to make himself available for the Indian team, he must play domestic cricket. Until and unless he is playing domestic cricket, he won't be considered," sources told this paper.

Dhoni hasn't played any cricket after the World Cup and as chief selector MSK Prasad told the other day, they were "moving on", picking Pant as his successor and Sanju Samson as Pant's back-up. Then again, Dhoni hasn't called time on his career yet. According to Jharkhand State Cricket Association (JSCA) secretary Sanjay Sahay, the 38-year-old is coming to the JSCA Stadium regularly but he hasn't approached the state body about playing domestic cricket.

"He is coming (here) daily. He goes to the gym, plays tennis, but I don't know if he wants to play domestic cricket this season," Sahay told *The Indian Express*. The Jharkhand U-19 squad will have a camp from Thursday. Asked if Dhoni might turn up for a few hits at the nets, Sahay said: "I don't have any information."

Dhoni carried a back niggle to the World Cup that got aggravated during the tournament. He also picked up a wrist injury. It's not known whether he has returned to full fitness. He isn't a part of the Jharkhand squad for the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, commencing on November 8. And since his Test retirement in December 2014, Dhoni hasn't played the Ranji Trophy. "It's his call. If he wants to play, he can join the squad whenever he likes," the JSCA secretary said.

India's next white-ball assignment is in December, when West Indies would be here for three T20 internationals and as many ODIs. And according to sources, Dhoni won't be considered for that series as well, irrespective of Pant's performance in the ongoing matches against Bangladesh.

"Retirement is his decision. But as long as a player is active, he has a chance to play for India. But he will have to take the domestic route to make an international comeback," the source said. Meanwhile, Pant didn't have a good game at Kotla on Sunday. He was involved in a mix-up that resulted in Shikhar Dhawan's run-out. The 'keeper-batsman had called for the second run, but changed his mind after realising that he misjudged it.

Then, in the third ball of the 10th over during Bangladesh's run-chase, India didn't review, when Yuzvendra Chahal's leg-before appeal against Mushfiqur Rahim was turned down by on-field umpire Nitin Menon. Rahim would have been out had India reviewed and Pant, as the 'keeper, probably should have made the call. Rahim was out on six then. He went on to score 60 not out off 43 balls to help secure Bangladesh's first-ever T20I victory against India.

In the final ball of the same over, Pant apparently asked Rohit to go upstairs after a caught behind appeal against Soumya Sarkar was negated. Replays didn't pick any spike and India lost their review. The Kotla crowd made their displeasure known. Pant was brutally trolled on social media as well.

Support for Pant

Part of the diatribe was also because of Dhoni success with DRS calls. Since its official launch in 2009, the DRS has undergone numerous modifications. But one thing remained constant — Dhoni's mastery over it. With time, it has even acquired a parallel acronym — Dhoni Review System. "It's priceless. I saw a stat that 95 per cent of the appeals that he (Dhoni) has made in his career have been successful. As a captain, I have no sort of extra think-



GAME, SET, MATCH?

Mahendra Singh Dhoni plays tennis at Jharkhand State Cricket Association Cricket Stadium, in Ranchi. PTI

ing as far as DRS is concerned. He is one voice, if he tells me it's outside the line or it is missing, the decision stands there. It's not left up to doubt or any further debate from there on," Virat Kohli had said of Dhoni. It would be unfair to expect Pant, who is 22 years of age and has just one full international season under his belt, to get a near-perfect record in DRS straight away. Not surprisingly, India's stand-in captain came to his young 'keeper's defence after the Bangladesh loss.

"Of course, Rishabh is young and he will need time to understand. It's too soon to judge whether he can make those decisions. Plus, the bowlers as well. It's a combination when the captain is not in the right position to make that decision," Rohit said at the post-match conference.

Former India wicketkeeper Kiran More attributed Dhoni's success to his maturity and his ability to judge the line of the ball better than most keepers. "Dhoni is smart, and a great judge of line and length. So, he can make those decisions correctly, whether the ball was going down the leg, or was it too high... things like that. By the time DRS was introduced in international cricket, Dhoni was already the Indian captain. So, he also

had the advantage of experience behind him," More told *The Indian Express*.

Even as he heaped praise on the ex-India captain, More was more guarded in his criticism against Pant. "This guy is so inexperienced. Give him time. You can't hold these things against him. He is working hard to cement his place in this team. I really think it's unfair to suggest that India lost the match because of those two faulty DRS calls made by Pant. On the contrary, I think it's our batting that has let us down. For the time being, leave that kid alone," More added.

As Prasad had said after the team selection meeting on October 24, Pant would be given a long rope. He also spoke about having a back-up in Samson. Prasad's comments had come on the heels of his meeting with BCCI president Sourav Ganguly. Incidentally, Ganguly, too, had to return to domestic cricket after he was dropped from the Test squad in 2006. The former India captain made a roaring comeback.

As for Dhoni, he has a mind of his own and it would be interesting to see his future course of action. Also, a new selection committee might come post the BCCI AGM later this month.

After poor air quality, now cyclone threat

GOPAL KATESHYA

RAJKOT, NOVEMBER 4

THE VAGARIES of nature continue to chase the touring Bangladesh team. After putting up with poor air quality at Feroz Shah Kotla in their opening T20 game, it was the threat of cyclone that greeted the visitors as they moved towards the west coast for their next match. With Bangladesh leading 1-0 in the three-match series and "heavy to very heavy" rainfall expected on Thursday, the day of the second T20 game here, the city had its fingers crossed.

According to the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) the cyclonic storm, Maha, is likely to make landfall between Diu and Porbandar early on Thursday. However, it is likely to weaken by the time it reaches the Gujarat coast. "It is very likely to intensify further till Tuesday morning and weaken thereafter," stated the IMD bulletin.

But that could result in rains at the venue for the second T20 game. "There will be widespread rainfall in the state when the cyclone makes landfall. Coastal areas of the state like Amreli, Bhavnagar, Rajkot, Botad, Surat, Vadodra will be affected and "heavy" to "very heavy rainfall" will occur at isolated places," Jayanto Sarkar, director of Meteorological Centre, Ahmedabad told reporters on Monday.

Meanwhile, the two teams landed in the early hours of Monday and remained confined to their hotel rooms because of the overcast conditions. They are scheduled to have net sessions on Tuesday.

It has been raining in isolated places in Saurashtra for more than a week now. Initially, the rains were induced by cyclone Kayaar, which had intensified into super cyclone before weakening and moving towards Oman coast. Rainfall was reported at isolated places in Saurashtra and Kutch regions on Monday also due to effect of the cyclone Maha.

SCA president Jaydev Shah said they were trying their best to ensure that the match is played. "We have completed pitch preparations early so that it can be kept covered. We would cover much of the outfield. Additionally, the drainage system of our ground is so good that some amount of rainfall should not disturb the match. We are hoping for the best and prepared for the worst," Shah, the former captain of Saurashtra Ranji team who had been elected president of the SCA told *The Indian Express*.

The third and final match of the series is scheduled to be played in Nagpur on 10th of this month.

IPL GC Meet: Idea of players' substitution in IPL floated, final call rests with Ganguly

New Delhi: The concept of players' substitutions during an IPL match could be floated during Wednesday's governing council meeting in Mumbai but the final call rests with BCCI president Sourav Ganguly. It has been learnt that a senior executive of the IPL operations team prepared a note few months ago with an intention to do away with traditional playing XI. According to the note, a 'Power Player' concept could be used, allowing a player, who is not a part of playing XI, to come in at the fall of a wicket or replace a bowler at any given point of time.

"The final call will rest with the BCCI president. He will certainly discuss with the IPL GC including chairman Brijesh Patel and other office bearers but a lot of factors needs to be taken into account," a senior BCCI functionary told PTI on conditions of anonymity. While Ganguly was unavailable for a comment, a source close to the

president said that there is a lot of scepticism to introduce this concept which could basically change the grammar of cricket. "Nothing has been decided yet. Also with four days left for Mushtaq Ali to begin, can this concept see light of the day as yet? We don't know yet," the source said.

A section among IPL operations team wants to push the envelope and introduce the concept during Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy (National T20 Tournament) starting November 9 but there is a section in the BCCI that believes it could specifically favour one particular high-profile franchise comprising veteran players.

There is one particular team which needs a bit of cushion during 2020 IPL with the average age of its core players being 35 plus. Has the IPL operations guy, who prepared the concept note, kept that particular franchise in mind? questioned another official. **PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**