

PCB links return of cricket to political stability in country

Contributed by Harris Badar
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KARACHI: Only political stability in the country can help Pakistan smash the unwanted tag of a cricketing pariah, says a senior Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) official.

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Saleem Altaf, the PCB chief operating officer, told 'The News' on Tuesday that Pakistan has gone into international isolation following the terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan cricketers in Lahore earlier this month and prayed that it would end sooner than later.

"It is a problem that is not very simple," said Altaf, a former Pakistan Test pacer, who finds himself at the centre of a damage control exercise following the March 3 attack on the Sri Lankan team that left several people, mostly cops, dead.

"The rest of the world sees the situation in Pakistan as volatile and until that's the case it's very difficult for us to convince cricket teams that they should come here and play," he stressed.

"Unless there is stability and political harmony, I'm afraid the perception about Pakistan is not going to change," he added.

PCB chairman Ijaz Butt had recently said that he is hoping that international cricket could return to Pakistan in the next six to nine months.

Altaf, however, is less hopeful.

He believes there is little hope that Pakistan will be able to host their only home series in the remaining part of the year - against New Zealand - in their own backyard.

"Our home series against New Zealand in November-December this year is very doubtful," he said. "We will have to keep the option of playing it on a neutral venue open."

It is expected that the series against New Zealand could be played in Dubai and Abu Dhabi - the two venues that will be hosting Pakistan's one-day series against Australia in April-May this year.

"It would be very difficult to find any other venues for the (New Zealand) series at that time of the year," he said referring to the fact that England - Pakistan's other neutral option - cannot host international cricket in winter.

Altaf said that it is a blessing in disguise that Pakistan do not have many home assignments for the next 12 months or so.

"Our only home series over the next year or so is against New Zealand," he said referring to the fact that Pakistan were scheduled to play most of their cricket abroad because of the future tour programme of the International Cricket Council (ICC).

Pakistan will be touring Sri Lanka this summer after playing in the World Twenty20 Championship in England in June. They will feature in the ICC Champions Trophy in South Africa later this year and will then tour Australia from January next year to play three Tests and five One-day Internationals.

Altaf hoped that things in Pakistan would normalise next year.

He recalled a statement by ICC president David Morgan, who has compared Pakistan's situation with that of Ireland that was once a no-go zone because of its volatile situation in the past.

"Mr Morgan has rightly pointed out that Pakistan's current situation is not a permanent one," said Altaf.

"Pakistan have gone through a similar phase when foreign teams refused to come here in the wake of a suicide attack that happened at the Sheraton (in Karachi), very near to where the New Zealand cricket team was staying. But later things became better."

In 2002, New Zealand called off the remainder of their tour of Pakistan following a bomb explosion in Karachi.

The tourists, based at the Pearl Continental Hotel, were preparing to depart for the National Stadium for the start of the second Test when a car exploded outside the nearby Sheraton. At least 11 people, including 10 French marine engineers, were killed.

Altaf made it clear that Pakistan will have to offer concrete security arrangements in the future.

"The return of cricket (to Pakistan) depends on whether we can assure complete security to visiting teams," he said. "We can only do that once things are in control and we can provide presidential level protection to the cricketers."

Some of the Sri Lankan cricketers and the match officials supervising the two-match Test series between Pakistan and Sri Lanka bitterly criticised what they termed as a big lapse in security which they believe enabled unidentified gunmen to carry out the Lahore attack. "It was a big mishap," said Altaf. "It will take some time to overcome it."