Buoyant Afghans plot Australia downfall after dumping out England

AFP – Afghanistan skipper Hashmatullah Shahidi on Thursday targeted another big scalp in the form of Australia after knocking England out of the Champions Trophy, with a semi-final spot the prize.
The Champions Trophy debutants sent England crashing out of the 50-over tournament with a thrilling eight-run victory in Lahore on Wednesday.

Afghanistan similarly stunned then holders England at the 2023 World Cup in India.

Next they play world champions Australia at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium on Friday in their final group match and must win to reach the last four of the eight-nation tournament.

"Obviously a win like this boosts every team's confidence and strengthens them," Shahidi said after Afghanistan sent England packing.

"Our morale has increased even more."

The skipper added: "The upcoming match will be crucial for both teams in the race for the semi-finals.

"Australia is a tough and good team. I have said this in previous conferences as well – that we came here to play good cricket.

"We will try to play a positive game. Just like we defeated England today, we hope to beat Australia as well.

"We won't put that pressure on ourselves by thinking too much about the semi-final qualification."

Rain is forecast in Lahore but even a washout will keep Afghanistan in contention of reaching the semi-finals, but they will then have to depend on other results or net run-rate.

– Zadran sparkles –

Afghanistan, a growing force in white-ball cricket, and Australia have played four ODIs previously with the Australians winning all of them.

At the 2023 World Cup, Afghanistan had Australia on the ropes at 91-7 when a cramping Glenn Maxwell hammered an unbeaten 201 to pull off victory in hot and humid Mumbai.

Afghanistan roared back to beat Australia at last year's T20 World Cup and they reached the semi-finals in a landmark achievement.

Asked about the threat that the big-hitting all-rounder Maxwell poses, Shahidi said: "I know that he played really well in the 2023 World Cup, but that's part of history."

Afghanistan suffered a 107-run hammering to South Africa in their Champions Trophy opener last week but bounced back to post 325-7 against England.

Ibrahim Zadran smashed 177, the highest individual innings in Champions Trophy history, after Afghanistan chose to bat and were struggling on a precarious 37-3.

In reply, England were all out for 317 to suffer their second straight defeat.

The 23-year-old Zadran, who scored 17 against South Africa, is back in action after a long lay-off following ankle surgery.

"Even though he was away from cricket for six months, it's never easy for a player to return from injury and make such a strong comeback in a high-stakes match," said Shahidi.

“I am extremely happy for him because he is a very talented and hard-working player.”

AFP