

## Babar Azam to open in Tri-Nation series as Pakistan reshuffles top order



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LAHORE: Former Pakistan captain Babar Azam is set to open the innings in the upcoming tri-nation series against South Africa and New Zealand, following Saim Ayub's injury setback.

Saim, who fractured his ankle during the second Test against South Africa last month, has been ruled out for two to three months, missing both the tri-series and the ICC Champions Trophy. His absence, along with the exclusion of Abdullah Shafique, has left two vacant opening spots.

According to sources, team management has discussed with Babar the plan to move him up the order, leveraging his proven success as a T20 opener in the one-day format. Fakhar Zaman, making his return to ODIs after more than a year, will partner Babar at the top.

Selectors will assess Babar's performance as an opener during the tri-series before finalizing Pakistan's strategy for the Champions Trophy. Meanwhile, Test specialist Saud Shakeel has also been recalled to bolster the top order.

Pakistan begins their tri-nation campaign against New Zealand on Feb 8 at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium, followed by a clash with South Africa in Karachi on Feb 12. The final will be played on Feb 14 in Karachi.

The ICC Champions Trophy, marking Pakistan's first ICC event at home since the 1996 World Cup, starts on Feb 19 against New Zealand in Karachi. Pakistan will then face India in Dubai on Feb 23 before concluding their group-stage matches against Bangladesh in Rawalpindi on Feb 27.