

## Northeast footballers rally support for Monika Devi

Footballers from the Northeast in the national team Friday rallied support for dope-charged Manipuri weightlifter Monika Devi, who was pulled out of the Indian Olympic contingent at the last minute.

Led by captain Bhaichung Bhutia and senior-pro Renedy Singh, the group comprising Surkumar Singh, Gourmangi Singh, Govin Singh, Bungo Singh and Sushil Singh said Monika should be given a fair trial.

Except Bhutia, who is a Sikkimese, the other players are from Manipur. But none of them knows Monika personally.

'We sympathise with Monika Devi and appeal to the powers-that-be that she be given a fair trial. We are not coming to a conclusion but at times sportspersons take substance without proper knowledge,' the Indian captain told reporters here at the team hotel.

Monika tested positive for a banned substance July 29 in a pre-Olympic test conducted by the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) and was dramatically withdrawn from the Olympic squad late Tuesday night. Pleading innocence, the weightlifter alleged she has been 'framed'.

Monika was the only Indian female weightlifter to participate in the Olympics and her selection was also marred by controversy. Earlier, Shailaja Pujari, who also served a two-year ban for doping, was selected for the Olympics but was dropped following accusations that she had bribed her way through.

The issue has created turmoil in Manipur's capital city of Imphal, and Renedy said: 'The reaction in our state is very strong. We can't do much for her, and by speaking through the media we can voice our support for her.'

Monika is not the first Manipuri weightlifter to test positive. In the past, Kunjarani Devi was banned for doping.

'It is true that some Northeast sportspersons have been charged with doping offences, but we can't generalise the case. However, I feel Monika has made a very strong statement by saying she can be killed if her second sample tests positive. I feel her case should be handled properly. Having not represented India in Olympics, I know how much the Games means for an athlete,' said Bhutia.

*Abhishek Roy* ( © IANS / India eNews)