

AFC POSTPONES MALAYSIA, NORTH KOREA MATCH IN PYONGYANG

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's 2019 Asian Cup qualifier against North Korea due to be played in Pyongyang later this month has been postponed, the Asian Football Confederation announced yesterday.

The Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) had made a request not to play the March 28 fixture in the North Korean capital under pressure from its government following the recent breakdown in relations between the two countries.

The countries have become embroiled in a growing row after Malaysia accused North Korea of assassinating Kim Jong Nam, the estranged half-brother of Pyongyang ruler Kim Jong Un, at Kuala Lumpur International Airport on Feb. 13.

"The Asian Football Confederation Competitions Committee have today decided to postpone the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 Final Round Qualifier between

DPR Korea and Malaysia," the regional governing body said in a statement.

"The match was scheduled to be played in the DPR Korea capital Pyongyang on March 28... but the AFC Competitions Committee have taken the decision to postpone the tie after escalating diplomatic tension between the Governments of DPR Korea and Malaysia.

"A new date for the game will be announced in due course."

The two nations were due to open the final phase of qualifying for the Asian Cup finals hosted by the United Arab Emirates with a Group B encounter at Pyongyang's Kim Il Sung Stadium.

FAM reacted by releasing a statement saying the AFC had acted appropriately given tensions had yet to subside. "FAM welcomes the decision made by

the AFC because it is seen as the most appropriate measures for the safety of the players and team officials," the association said.

Hong Kong and Lebanon will also play in North Korea during qualifying for the 2019 Asian Cup, the continent's equivalent of the European Championships.

Hong Kong FA chief executive Mark Sutcliffe on Thursday also called for the match to be postponed, adding that the tie could be played in Pyongyang at a later date when relations between the countries had improved.

Despite the postponement of the North Korea tie, Malaysia still plan to travel to the Philippines for an international friendly against their Southeast Asian neighbours at the Rizal Memorial Stadium in Manila on March 22. — Reuters



FLORENCE: Fiorentina's owner Diego Della Valle, left, Florence's mayor Diego Nardella, center, and Fiorentina's executive president Mario Cognini, right, look at a plastic model of the new stadium in Florence, Italy, yesterday. Fiorentina has unveiled plans for a new stadium yesterday, which it hopes to be playing in by 2021. The new stadium will seat 40,000 people, with the closest fans being only seven meters from the field. — AP

PREVIEW

LINCOLN DREAMING OF ARSENAL SCALP IN FAIRYTALE QUARTER-FINAL

LONDON: Non-league Lincoln City have enjoyed a fairytale run to the quarter-finals of the FA Cup and are now dreaming of piling more misery on Arsene Wenger and Arsenal today.

The sides meet at the Emirates Stadium with under-pressure Wenger knowing an unthinkable defeat against fifth-tier opposition would surely spell the end for him in north London.

Lincoln have already seen off Premier League side Burnley, two clubs from the second-tier Championship and one from the third-tier League One in their remarkable run to the last eight.

They are the first non-league club to reach this stage of the competition since 1914, although they are at the very top of the non-league pyramid, sitting top of the National League and on course to return to the Football League after a six-year absence.

Nevertheless, defeating Arsenal

would eclipse all else and go down as the greatest ever FA Cup shock. And while Danny Cowley's side appreciate the scale of the challenge, they believe they can use the discontent at the Emirates Stadium in their favour.

"The boss said if we can go there and be in the game after 15 or 20 minutes then the crowd might turn on them and we might have 60,000 supporting us instead of 9,000," said skipper Luke Waterfall.

"You never know, it's one of those situations where they want the manager out so there might be a lot of Arsenal fans going to that game wishing we can get something out of that game to see the end of the manager. "We've got to use it to our advantage.

"The pressure is massively off us this time, all the pressure is on Arsenal. "They are only fighting on this front now—the FA Cup is all they've got to play for so they're going to be trying

ridiculously hard to beat us and go on and win the FA Cup."

OZIL DOUBTS

The doubts over Wenger's long reign at Arsenal being extended won't cease if they end Lincoln's run but defeat would pretty much ensure his time was up.

The 67-year-old Frenchman still has the backing of the board despite the humiliation of the 10-2 aggregate score in exiting the Champions League to Bayern Munich in midweek.

The Gunners enter the clash with morale further dented over splits appearing in the squad, Theo Walcott confirming Chilean star Alexis Sanchez had clashed with team-mates prior to the Liverpool defeat last Saturday.

For the Lincoln game, Wenger has continued doubts due to illness over Mesut Ozil, Danny Welbeck and Alex Iwobi. — Reuters

RANGERS TURMOIL WON'T DISTRACT CELTIC: RODGERS

GLASGOW: Celtic manager Brendan Rodgers insists the uncertainty at bitter rivals Rangers will not affect them in Sunday's Old Firm derby at Parkhead.

Rangers have been in turmoil on and off the pitch in recent weeks since Mark Warburton and his backroom team departed Ibrox last month.

Graeme Murty was placed in interim charge and has recorded three wins and two defeats in his five games. The Under-20s coach is likely to continue in the dugout for the fourth Old Firm derby of the season.

That is despite Portuguese coach Pedro Caixinha looking set to take the job permanently after being granted permission from Qatari club Al-Gharafa to join Rangers.

However, Rodgers believes the Rangers players will put the managerial situation to the back of their minds and will be concentrating on trying to inflict a first domestic defeat of the season on Celtic.

"The players are professional enough to get on with it," Rodgers said.

"Graeme's done an excellent job."

"It's not an easy situation when you're working with the younger players and then you've got to step into the position when the manager goes. "I'm sure whatever way it works out for him, he'll have benefited from it."

'WE HAVE TURNED THE CORNER'

Celtic are 33 points ahead of third-placed Rangers at the top of the Scottish Premiership and have won all three Old Firm encounters this term, including a 5-1 league victory at Celtic Park in their first meeting of the season.

Another win would put them on the verge of securing a sixth successive title win and hurt their rivals chances of catching Aberdeen in second spot.

Despite their incredible run, Rodgers is taking nothing for granted.

"Celtic v Rangers, the games I've been involved in so far, have been fantastic and of course we played well in the three games and got the result," the former Liverpool manager said.

"We always anticipate a tough game and I'm sure this one will be no different."

If beating their biggest rivals wasn't incentive enough, Rangers could deny Celtic a host of European records by claiming victory.

The reigning champions have won their past 22 Premiership games as they chase their own record of 25 league wins in a row and Benfica's European record of 29 successive victories set in 1971/72.

Rodgers' side are also well on course to smash Europe's largest ever title-winning margin of 31 points set by French giants Paris Saint-Germain in 2015/16 — they currently lead Aberdeen by 27 points.

Rangers will be weakened by the suspension of Joe Garner, who scored a hat-trick in last weekend's 6-0 thrashing of Hamilton Academical in the Scottish Cup.

However, striker Martyn Waghorn believes Rangers can become the first Scottish side to defeat Celtic this season and make up for the disappointment they suffered on their last visit. — AFP