

India's top football club to play in Asian champions league

In a major boost to club football in the country, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has chosen India as one of the 11 participants in the revamped 2009 Champions League.

The decision was taken Tuesday at the AFC headquarters in Kuala Lumpur by the AFC Pro-League Ad-Hoc Committee under the chairmanship of Saburo Kawabuchi.

With this decision, the champions of I-League, the professional league in the country, will take part in the Champions League. At present the I-League champions and Federation Cup winners are also eligible for the AFC Cup.

Japan, South Korea, Australia, China, Indonesia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Iran were the other countries which were recommended by the committee for the 2009 AFC Champions League to be relaunched on completely professional lines.

'I am very proud of the achievements of this committee and they are laying down the blueprint for the professionalisation of Asian football,' said AFC President Mohamed Bin Hammam.

'Asian football needs a big reformation process to make it professional and successful, and I know radical changes might not please everybody. But we must have the courage of conviction,' he added.

The AFC Pro-League Ad-Hoc Committee employed four grades 'A' (meet all criteria), 'B' (assured to meet criteria by Oct 1), 'C' (not assured to meet criteria by Oct. 1) and 'D' (do not meet the criteria) to assess the suitability of 21 member associations for tournament.

Only Japan met all the criteria and bagged 'A' in all the fields. Ten countries were rated 'B' which means the committee is confident of them meeting the criteria by Oct 1 this year. Six received a 'C' which makes them doubtful of meeting the deadline, while four were rated 'D'.

Any country that fails to meet the AFC criteria (except for commercial entity of the clubs) by Oct 1 cannot participate in the new Champions League. The deadline for the commercial entity clause is Dec 15.

The new competition format will also allow the champions and runners-up of the AFC Cup 2008 to participate in the AFC Champions League via a play-off, providing opportunity to more clubs to become Asian champions.

The current format will be used in 2009 and 2010. Then other countries have another chance to participate.

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