
New FIFA Chief Infantino Wants More Asian Teams in World Cup

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During a visit to South Korea's capital Seoul on Wednesday FIFA President Gianni Infantino pressed his case for an enlarged 40-team World Cup tournament with more teams from Asia making up the numbers.

Infantino, who arrived in South Korea earlier in the day to meet with FIFA sponsors Hyundai Motor Group, said his visit was aimed at rebuilding trust with corporate partners and presenting his vision of a "new FIFA."

World soccer's scandal-hit governing body is in the midst of its worst crisis in its 112-year history, with more than 40 individuals and entities, including many former FIFA officials, charged with corruption-related offences in the United States.

Infantino, elected in February to replace the disgraced previous body chief Sepp Blatter, told reporters that adding eight more teams to the World Cup from 2026 was "perfectly justified".

"Football is not only Europe and South America. Football is the world," he said.

"I'm not a dictator so I can't impose anything but I'm trying to convince everyone. I believe we have to increase the number of teams... because we have to be more inclusive."

Asia currently has four automatic spots at the World Cup, with a fifth up for grabs in an inter-confederation playoff, and Infantino said that number could rise to at least six under an expanded format.

FIFA has struggled to find new sponsors since the current crisis erupted and Asia's financial muscle could see the region play a bigger role.

Hyundai Motor Co. and Kia Motors Corp., South Korea's two largest automakers and affiliates of the Hyundai conglomerate, have extended their partnership with FIFA until 2022.

China has also shown its ambition on the global soccer stage with the government setting out an ambitious plan to become a world soccer power by 2050. While Dalian Wanda Group, the country's biggest commercial property developer, became the first top level Chinese sponsor of FIFA last month.

A source close to the deal said the 15-year sponsorship agreement with Wanda would be worth "hundreds of millions of dollars."

Infantino will next travel to Bangkok on Thursday to take part in the Thai FA's 100th anniversary celebrations.
