

## **Road to 2022 World Cup begins in Mongolia**

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The long road to the 2022 World Cup finals begins in the footballing backwaters of Mongolia on Thursday as the first games that count towards qualification for Qatar are hosted in Asia. Mongolia, who have only ever won a single World Cup qualifying match, host Brunei Darussalam in the first of six first round qualifiers across Asia, which also serve as early round eliminators for the next Asian Cup in 2023.

The match takes place at the Mongolian Football Federation stadium in Ulan Bator at 0900GMT, before other games in Laos, Macau, Cambodia and Bhutan and one on Friday in Malaysia. The arena, built from FIFA funding, has a 5,000-capacity and an artificial pitch against the backdrop of the Mongolian steppes. It is the second time in a row Mongolia, 187th in the FIFA rankings, are involved in the first game of a World Cup qualifying campaign. They were beaten 4-1 away by Timor-Leste in the Russia 2018 preliminaries but the result was later expunged when it was discovered the home team was packed with Brazilians.

Previous World Cup qualifying campaigns have kicked off on side-by-side pitches in Samoa (for South Africa 2010) and in front of 100 spectators on neutral turf in Trinidad and Tobago when hosts Montserrat lost 5-2 to Belize for Brazil 2014. FIFA decided this year to break with tradition by not holding a qualifying round draw ceremony in the upcoming host nation.

“Given the fact that the 2022 World Cup will take place in November-December and that each confederation plans a different timeline for their qualifiers to the tournament, it has been agreed that a preliminary draw will be held separately for each one of them,” a FIFA spokesman told Reuters on Tuesday.

“The Asian Football Confederation has already started the qualifying competition and a second draw is scheduled to take place in July.

“Discussions involving the other confederations and the draws for their preliminary competitions are currently ongoing and further details will follow in due course.”

- Reuters