

Bringing co-hosts together

TOKYO, Feb 13 (AP): For officials of Japan and South Korea, joint hosts of the 2002 football World Cup, trips between each other capitals have become routine as they try to bridge more than the stretch of water that separates them.

"We are optimistic but it's really a big challenge," said Tadao Murata of the Japan organising committee for the FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan (JAWOC), mindful of the enormous tasks to be completed by June 2002.

Some 50 people are at work full time at JAWOC's Tokyo headquarters. That will swell to 100 by April when they, along with football's world governing body FIFA, prepare the draw for the qualifying round.

Five contact groups have been formed by JAWOC and its South Korean counterpart, KOWOC.

They will have to tread softly, Murata acknowledged, noting: "Japan and South Korea are so different and I think more dissimilar than European countries between themselves."

Ticket pricing has to allow for the much weaker purchasing power of the Koreans as against the Japanese.

Common logos, the sharing out of match fixtures and readiness for surprise moves from North Korea during the event are other major sources of worry.

In a show of goodwill, Tokyo and Seoul decided last month to ease some visa restrictions for the finals and form twin cities of ten host cities in each country.

"Co-organising such a big event needs very close co-operation because differences can erupt over delicate situations," said Rene-Georges Querry, who officiated at France '98.

In Tokyo to share experiences from that event, Querry said the organisation of transport between venues would be a major problem.

"Crowd control is important but could be limited in view of the traditional discipline that characterises the two countries and their distance from Europe and Latin America, the two major regions from where hooligans travel," he said.

Despite recent signs of a thaw, ties between Japan and South Korea remain stuck in deep distrust, differences are still blocking a possible visit to Seoul by Emperor Akihito.

President Kim Dae-jung said Thursday that it would not be suitable for the visit to take place after the World Cup but the Japanese public thinks the opposite, opinion polls show.

The emperor's visit has great significance as it would be the first since a 35-year Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula ended in 1945, the period left behind scars too deep to be healed by the exchange of goodwill that followed Kim's Japan trip in October.

CAF invites Nigeria

LAGOS, Feb 13: Nigeria has been invited to bid for next year's African Nation's Cup in place of Zimbabwe, reports Reuters.

The new agency of Nigeria on Friday quoted sports ministry officials as saying the invitation came from the Confederation of African Football (CAF).

On Thursday, Morocco said it was prepared to step in and host the tournament which CAF took away from Zimbabwe on Monday, saying it had not made sufficient progress in building stadiums or developing an infrastructure to televised the games.

South Africa, host in 1996, said it, too, would consider stepping in.

CAF has set March 10 as a deadline for bids, it will take a decision on March 14.

Nigeria, host of the World Youth Championships in April, south Africa and Morocco are among five African nations bidding to stage the 2006 World Cup finals.



Norwegian Lasse Kjus bites the medal after winning the Men's Giant Slalom at the World Alpine Ski Championships in Vail, Colorado on February 12. Kjus also won gold medals in Giant Slalom and Super G events besides a silver in the Combined and Downhill. — AFP photo

De Boers ready for Real



MADRID, Feb 13 (Reuters/ Internet): Barcelona's Frank and Ronald de Boer are used to the pressure of in-

ter-city rivalries from their days at Ajax Amsterdam.

Games between Ajax and Rotterdam rivals Feyenoord are among the toughest in European club soccer. However even these games cannot match the frenzied atmosphere that surrounds Barcelona versus Real Madrid.

The twins will get their first taste of the biggest occasion in Spanish soccer on Sunday. "We always had the dream of playing in this match and there is no doubt I'm starting to feel nervous," Frank de Boer admitted.

Ronald was more relaxed. "Having to get ready for Wednesday's international against Portugal helped take my mind off things.

"However I'm sure it's going to be an unforgettable experience. This match in the Nou Camp has its own unique characteristics."

The public could be a determining factor. They are going to be behind us and not Madrid, that's for sure," Frank added.

Only 345 tickets have gone on sale to Real supporters. The Nou Camp will still be filled to its 112,000 capacity.

Both brothers said playing against a Real Madrid side coached by their compatriot Guus Hiddink would be a strange experience. They played under Hiddink when the Dutch national side finished fourth in Euro '96 last summer.

Their relations with Hiddink remain extremely warm since they joined Barcelona last month, each man costing \$11 million.

"I wish him all the best and hope he has much success, but

only from next Monday," Ronald joked.

Frank first encountered Real Madrid in 1992 during a pre-season tournament at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium, when Ajax won 3-1.

Three years later at the same tournament both brothers were in the Ajax line-up when Real were 1-0 winners.

However, they got their revenge later in the year during the European Cup run which took Ajax to a final against Juventus they eventually lost on penalties.

Ajax, containing the de Boers, won 1-0 in Amsterdam and then 2-0 in Madrid.

The record of success over Real has led Ronald to believe he and his brother could be talismans for Barcelona on Sunday.

"We can win our eighth consecutive league game and that would put six points between ourselves and Real," he said.

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