

I see this qualification as a huge achievement. This is a very young group. Almost half the squad is under 20 years old, and at the same time our U-20 team also qualified for the Asian Cup. It shows there's something big happening.

Bangladesh coach
PETER BUTLER



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Asia's finest gather as Bangladesh prepare for historic debut

STAR SPORTS DESK

Bangladesh's journey in women's international football began with a modest first step – their maiden international fixture against Nepal at the South Asian Games in Dhaka in 2010. What started as a tentative introduction to the international arena has, over the next sixteen years, grown into one of the proudest stories in the country's sporting history.

What started with a modest South Asian Games fixture against Nepal in 2010 has grown into one of the proudest journeys in Bangladesh sport, with the Bangladesh Women's football team now preparing for their maiden appearance at the AFC Women's Asian Cup in Australia – a historic milestone for the country's women's football programme.

The rise to this stage has been built on persistence and collective effort. From players and their families to administrators, sponsors and supporters, many have contributed to a journey that transformed modest ambitions into genuine conviction. Qualification last July confirmed the steady progress of the programme and secured Bangladesh a place among Asia's elite for the first time.

The tournament, which begins on March 1 and runs across Perth, Gold Coast and

Sydney, will feature 12 of Asia's strongest sides. Returning to Australia for the first time since 2006, the competition will use several venues that staged matches during the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, providing Bangladesh's young squad with a rare opportunity to perform on some of the biggest stages in the region.

Drawn in a difficult Group B alongside defending champions China, former champions North Korea and Uzbekistan, Bangladesh face a daunting introduction to top-level continental football. Their opening match against China in Sydney on March 3 will be followed by equally demanding encounters against North Korea and Uzbekistan – fixtures that will test both the team's resilience and its readiness.

The scale of the challenge has led head coach Peter Butler to temper expectations and emphasise discipline over adventure, particularly with a squad in which many players are still under 20.

"We will have to modify our approach," Butler recently said. "If you go there with a cavalier mindset thinking you can just press and attack these teams, you are in for the shock of your lives. When you play top teams and make mistakes, you get severely punished."

Rather than focusing solely on results,

Butler views the tournament as part of a longer journey – an opportunity to help a young group mature through exposure to the highest level of competition.

"This is an opportunity for these players to showcase their talents on a much larger stage," he said. "We are not coming in expecting to win the tournament, but the main aim is to lay the foundations, to build something that enables Bangladesh to qualify again and again."

Beyond the immediate challenge, the tournament carries additional significance as it offers a pathway to the 2027 FIFA Women's World Cup, giving Bangladesh further motivation to compete as strongly as possible.

Hosts Australia will kick off the tournament against the Philippines in Perth, while the continent's established powers once again line up as title contenders.

For Bangladesh, the Asian Cup represents both an arrival and a beginning – a chance to measure themselves against Asia's best while laying the groundwork for the future. The experience gained in Australia may ultimately prove as valuable as the results themselves, shaping the next phase of a journey that continues to gather momentum.

'A lot of effort required to compete against the best'

Having created history by qualifying for the AFC Women's Asian Cup for the first time in July last year, Bangladesh's women's football team are preparing for their maiden appearance at Asia's premier competition. Although the Bangladesh Football Federation had outlined an ambitious preparation plan, the programme fell short before the team departed for Australia last week. Despite the limitations in preparation, captain Afeida Khandoker has vowed that the team will give their best against Asia's leading sides. She spoke to The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about expectations, preparation and future ambitions. The excerpts are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): You are going to play in the Asia Cup for the first time; what are your expectations?

Afeida Khandoker (AK): Since this is our first appearance, expectations are naturally high. This achievement did not come overnight; it is the result of long and sustained hard work. We will be facing some of Asia's strongest teams, so we must give a lot of effort to compete against the best. From the very beginning, we will try to produce positive results.

DS: Since qualifying in July last year, Bangladesh have played only four international matches and held two phases of intensive training at KEPZ. Do you feel there were any gaps in preparation?

AK: I would not say there were major gaps in preparation. We played 10 matches in the recently concluded Women's Football League, and we learned a lot from those games. We tried to improve by correcting our mistakes from the league. Whatever happened, we believe it has helped us move forward.

DS: You have previously played against strong teams such as Japan and Vietnam at the Asian Games. How challenging will it be to face China and North Korea in the group stage in Sydney?

AK: We played against Japan a long time ago, but we have not faced China or North Korea before. From our experience against South Korea at the U-20 level, we saw how quick and advanced they were in every aspect. The lessons we learned from that match could be useful in the Asian Cup.

DS: You were outside the national camp for a period due to the league. How much has your fitness improved under fitness trainer Cameron Lord in the short training phase?

AK: Everyone is now in quite good physical condition. During the league break for the

SAFF Women's U-19 Championship, we worked very hard under him. We tried to follow all his instructions and hopefully the results will be positive.

DS: How do you think Bangladesh's participation in the Asian Cup will influence women's football in the country in the future?

AK: Everyone dreams that Bangladesh will one day play in the World Cup. The interest from the public, especially after winning the SAFF Women's Championship twice and qualifying for the Asian Cup, shows that women's football will grow further in the coming years.

DS: How comfortable do the senior players feel with the inclusion of new faces like Alpi Akter, Saurovi Akanda Priti and Anika Rania Siddiqui?

AK: It is very encouraging for the whole team. We also have the AFC Women's U-20 Championship after the Asian Cup, so it is important for younger players to gain experience. Training and playing with the senior team

will help them learn how to handle competitive situations and perform better in the future.

DS: The national team have performed well internationally, but the domestic structure remains relatively weak. Do you have any regrets about the competition system?

AK: Honestly, there is nothing to regret or be frustrated about. In our country, the allocation for men's football has always been higher than for women, and we have accepted that reality. However, facilities for women's footballers should be improved because we have been achieving better results. I also think it is important for us to face stronger opponents in domestic competitions.



TEAM PROFILE

GROUPS

Group A

AUSTRALIA

FIFA Ranking: 15
Previous appearances: 8
Best finish: **Champions (2010)**
2022 record: **Quarterfinals**
Coach: **Joe Montemurro**

SOUTH KOREA

FIFA Ranking: 21
Previous appearances: 13
Best finish: **Runners-up (2022)**
2022 record: **Runners-up**
Coach: **Shin Sang-woo**

PHILIPPINES

FIFA Ranking: 41
Previous appearances: 10
Best finish: **Semi-finals (2022)**
2022 record: **Semi-finals**
Coach: **Mark Torcaso**

IRAN

FIFA Ranking: 68
Previous appearances: 1
Best finish: **Group Stage**
2022 record: **Group Stage**
Coach: **Marziyeh Jafari**

Group B

CHINA

FIFA Ranking: 17
Previous appearances: 15



PHOTO: AFC

Best finish: **Champions (9 times)**
2022 record: **Champions**
Coach: **Ante Milicic**

NORTH KOREA

FIFA Ranking: 9
Previous appearances: 10
Best finish: **Champions**
2022 record: **Did not participate**
Coach: **Ri Song Ho**

BANGLADESH

FIFA Ranking: 112
Previous appearances: **Debutants**
Coach: **Peter Butler**

UZBEKISTAN

FIFA Ranking: 49
Previous appearances: 5
Best finish: **Group stage**

2022 record: **Did not participate**
Coach: **Kotryna Kulbyte**
Group C

JAPAN

FIFA World Ranking: 8
Previous appearances: 17
Coach: **Nils Nielsen**

VIETNAM

FIFA World Ranking: 36
Previous appearances: 9
Best placing: **Quarterfinals**
2022 result: **Quarterfinals**
Coach: **Mai Duc Chung**

Chinese Taipei

FIFA World Ranking: 40
Previous appearances: 14
Best placing: **Champions (3 times)**
2022 result:

Quarterfinals
Coach: **Chan Hiu Meng**

INDIA

FIFA World Ranking: 67
Previous appearances: 9
Best placing: **Runners-up (2)**
2022 result: **Withdrew**
Coach: **Amelia Valverde**

KEY DATES

Tournament: March 1-21, 2026

Opening Match

Australia vs Philippines

Perth

Knockout Stage

Quarterfinals

March 13-15,

Semifinals

March 17-18,

Playoffs

March 19

Final

March 21

Bangladesh's Matches

Bangladesh vs China
March 3, 2:00 pm (BST),
Sydney

Bangladesh vs DPR Korea
March 6, 8:00 am (BST)

Sydney

Bangladesh vs Uzbekistan

March 9, 3:00 pm (BST),
Perth

ROLL OF HONOUR

Year	Host	Winners	Runners-up
1975	Hong Kong	New Zealand	Thailand
1977	Chinese Taipei	Chinese Taipei	Thailand
1979	India	Chinese Taipei	India
1981	Hong Kong	Chinese Taipei	Thailand
1983	Thailand	Thailand	India
1986	Hong Kong	China	Japan
1989	Hong Kong	China	Chinese Taipei
1991	Japan	China	Japan
1993	Malaysia	China	North Korea
1995	Malaysia	China	South Korea
1997	China	China	North Korea
1999	Philippines	China	Chinese Taipei
2001	Taiwan	North Korea	China
2003	Thailand	North Korea	China
2006	Australia	China	Australia
2008	Vietnam	North Korea	China
2010	China	Australia	North Korea
2014	Vietnam	Japan	Australia
2018	Jordan	Japan	Australia
2022	India	China	South Korea

Most titles: China (9)

Defending champions: China (2022)