

S. Korea, U.S. to continue beef talks this week

Xinhua

June 16, 2008

SEOUL -- Top trade negotiators from South Korea and the United States will hold a third round of meetings this week to discuss revising parts of a bilateral beef trade deal reached in mid-April, Yonhap News Agency quoted ranking officials at the South Korean embassy in Washington as reporting on Monday.

The South Korean delegation had originally planned to leave Washington to return home without reaching a deal, but abruptly canceled its plan at the request of the U.S. government. The talks will be resumed on Monday, said an embassy official in Washington.

Seoul has been rocked with protests since early May over President Lee Myung-bak's administration's decision to lift ban on American beef, as tens of thousands have taken to the streets over concerns about mad cow disease.

The interruption comes amid reports that the sides were having difficulty agreeing on a policy that would guarantee a voluntarily ban on shipments of beef from cattle over 30 months old from U.S. exporters.

South Korean and U.S. officials have said they are discussing ways to support voluntary efforts "in written or any other forms" by the U.S. beef industry to label beef packages showing the age of slaughtered cattle.

Evidence suggests that cattle younger than 30 months old are less susceptible to mad cow disease. South Korea, once the third-largest importer of American beef, first banned the meat in 2003 after a case of mad cow was reported in Washington state.

South Korea wants the Bush administration to endorse the voluntary export ban, similar to a case in the 1980s when Tokyo voluntarily imposed an automobile export quota to avoid trade frictions.

Washington has refused to renegotiate the beef deal, which was signed on April 18 to allow immediate resumption of shipments of U.S. beef from cattle of all ages.

The South Korean government, however, has delayed taking administrative measures to implement the agreement amid a massive public outcry.

South Korean lawmakers, who visited Washington last week to discuss the beef issue with their U.S. counterparts, have said that several senior U.S. senators and congressmen threatened to boycott the free trade agreement signed between Seoul and Washington in June last year.

The U.S. lawmakers have even talked about renegotiating the FTA-- which awaits parliamentary ratification on both sides -- especially on issue of the U.S. automobile industry's wider access to the South Korean market, should the beef deal be brought up again, the South Korean lawmakers said.

The beef agreement is one of several pre-conditions for congressional approval of the FTA, although beef is not part of the trade agreement, which would be the biggest deal for the U.S.