

South Korea's Lee to Fire Ministers Amid Anger Over U.S. Beef

By Heejin Koo
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South Korean President Lee Myung Bak said he'll fire cabinet ministers and aides after a botched attempt to end a ban on U.S. beef imports sparked protests and strikes that have nearly paralyzed shipping and construction.

"I will incorporate wide-scale changes in the Blue House secretarial staff, and I will also change the cabinet," Lee said in a public address in Seoul. "I will humbly accept the public's sharp criticism regarding the first appointments, and make all effort that the next appointments meet the public's requirements."

Lee's decision to resume importing U.S. beef, and soaring fuel prices, sparked protests and strikes that have brought the country's ports and construction sites to a near standstill. The demonstrations threaten Lee's leadership four months into his administration.

"The public knows that something has gone wrong with the 'control tower' for Lee's administration," said Choi Jin, head of the Institute of Presidential Leadership in Seoul. "The president needs to bring in the right people, balanced in both ability and political experience."

Lee is trying to quell public fears that the U.S. may export meat tainted with mad-cow disease to South Korea. Trade Minister Kim Jong Hoon is in Washington trying to negotiate a deal under which the U.S. would voluntarily limit beef exports to the country to meat from cattle younger than 30 months. Talks will continue today in Washington, the ministry said.

South Korea banned the meat in 2003 when the U.S. discovered a case of mad-cow disease, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy. The restrictions were partially lifted in 2006 before imports were halted again last October after prohibited bone fragments were found in shipments.

"I am here to frankly explain recent events and to seek the people's understanding," Lee said today. He said his negotiators are in Washington "to ensure that no meat from cattle of older than 30 months would be served on our dinner tables."

Lee declined to say which ministers he will replace. He said he'll ensure that any changes to the cabinet won't adversely affect the running of the government.

“Lee, who pledged a pro-U.S. administration, is hoping the U.S. will help him diffuse some of the public anger over the beef issue,” Paik Jin Hyun, a professor at the Graduate School of International Studies at Seoul National University said. “Lee had been focused mainly on the U.S.-Korea free-trade agreement, and lacked the foresight to how sensitive the people would react to food related matters.”

Focusing on Trade

Lee, who won a landslide victory on pledges to boost the economy, said he had focused on ratification of a \$29 billion trade deal with the U.S., and hadn't anticipated public fears about food safety.

“I felt that the possibility of a ratification of the FTA within the year would be impossible, if we continued to refuse resuming U.S. beef imports,” Lee said. “There was also a possibility of trade friction with the U.S. I felt that beef negotiations were unavoidable.”

“Once the FTA is ratified, there will be 340,000 new jobs, and our gross domestic product will increase more than 6 percent over the next 10 years,” Lee said. “As president, I didn't want to miss this opportunity. I couldn't stand by and watch this window of opportunity shut on us.”

Lee's aides have been under fire from opposition parties as well as some members of his own ruling Grand National Party for failing to properly gauge public opinion on the beef issue. GNP lawmaker Chung Doo Un, one of the president's confidantes, repeatedly accused Lee's aides of “abusing their power” and “preventing the president from hearing the truth.”

Lee pledged to take public opinion into consideration in future actions.

“Even if the issues were great and needed immediate resolution, we should have taken care on how the people would accept the matter -- on what the people were asking for. The government and I are reflecting on this point with excruciating pain.”

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