

Pres. Lee Vows to Disallow Imports of Old U.S. Beef

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President Lee Myung-bak said on Thursday that unless Washington accepts Seoul's demand to export only beef from cattle aged less than 30 months, Korea will stop the importation of all American beef.

In a special press conference at Cheong Wa Dae, President Lee said that if Seoul's request is rejected, the government will delay the promulgation of sanitary terms on U.S. beef imports.

Lee pledged that the government will, under any circumstances, prevent American beef from old cattle from being sold to domestic consumers. "Unless Washington offers us a guarantee, we will not conduct quarantine inspections on U.S. beef from cattle aged older than 30 months. Instead, we will send it back," he added.

"I failed to have a full understanding of the people's concerns on food safety," Lee said. "I should have more carefully looked at what the people wanted and how they would respond to certain outcomes, no matter how urgent a national task it was. I'm bitterly reflecting on my failure to do so."

When asked whether the ongoing additional talks over the beef deal would have a negative impact on the free trade agreement between Korea and the United States, the president said, "The FTA deal, which has already been agreed upon by the two governments, must not be changed. I expect the FTA to be ratified during President George W. Bush's term."

Lee also said that he will not pursue his campaign pledge to build a cross-country canal if the people oppose to it. Lee noted, "Once again, I have realized to the bottom of my heart that no policy can succeed without the public's support."

In addition, the president denied rumors about the government's plan to privatize public corporations in charge of supplying gas, water and electricity, and health insurance services.

Lee, however, said that he will push reforms on state-run institutions, regulations and the education system as it is essential to make Korea to join the ranks of advanced nations.

On the reshuffle of the Cabinet and his aides, Lee said that he will do his best to live up to the people's expectations. "I will make a large scale reshuffle of the Cheong Wa Dae secretaries as if I were making a fresh start. I will also shortly reshuffle the Cabinet in line with the opening of the National Assembly," Lee said.

As for the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the Korea Cargo Transport Workers Union's strikes, the president said that, if their walkouts continue for a prolonged period, this will deal a severe blow to the nation's economy, eventually pressuring the entire population, including workers. Lee said, "It is time for not only businesses, but also the government and workers to take a step back and share the pains."

Lee also promised to review the nation's problematic logistics system and come up with fundamental measures to improve the distribution system of domestic products, including agricultural goods.