

# Mixed Responses to South Korean President's Beef Apology

Yonhap News Agency  
June 19, 2008

SEOUL -- President Lee Myung-bak [Ri Myo'ng- pak] said Thursday his administration will secure a firm US Government guarantee to prohibit American private exporters from sending beef from cattle older than 30 months to South Korea in an effort to address public fears over mad cow disease.

In a special news conference, Lee offered his second apology to the nation in less than a month, saying he and his government deeply regret failing to have a full understanding of the Korean people's concerns prior to deciding in mid-April to unconditionally lift a ban on US beef imports.

"I and my government should have looked at what the people want regarding food safety more carefully. But we failed to do so and now seriously reflect on the failure," the president said.

Lee already issued a beef-related statement on May 22, apologizing for failing to understand the people's concern about mad cow disease and vowing to suspend US beef imports if the health of the people is threatened.

The embattled president is planning to replace his chief of staff, Yu Woo-ik, and almost all of his senior secretaries on Friday in a bid to polish his administration's image, which has been tainted by the beef dispute and the appointment of a number of ethically problematic figures as top government officials.

Reshuffle of his Cabinet, which had offered to resign last week over the beef row, is likely to be carried out next week.

Lee explained that his administration has had no choice but to reject the people's demand for a renegotiation of the beef deal with Washington for fear of serious backlash on the Korean economy, and has instead decided to pursue additional talks.

"As long as the Korean people don't want, US beef from cattle older than 30 months would never be offered to Korean consumers. I'll obtain a firm US government guarantee regarding the issue. I expect the US, as an ally of South Korea, to respect the will of the South Korean people," said Lee.

The president then made it clear that South Korea would not import US beef if the issue over the cattle age restriction is not resolved.

"During my recent telephone talks with US President George W. Bush, I emphasized that (South Korea's) proposal for cattle age limit has to be accepted and clearly said we'll not import US beef without the (relevant) US government guarantee," said Lee in a question-and-answer session with reporters.

"We and the US have thus far held five rounds of negotiations (on revising the beef deal). I'm convinced that the US will eventually accept our demand."

Asked whether revising the beef deal would have a negative impact on a free trade agreement (FTA) between South Korea and the US, the president replied that the contents of the FTA deal should never be changed. "President Bush has promised to obtain (legislative approval) for the Korea-US FTA before his term ends at the end of this year. I expect the FTA deal to be finally ratified during Bush's term."

Meanwhile, the president said he is willing to abandon his election pledge to build an inland waterway spanning the Korean Peninsula if the project is opposed by the Korean people. Lee also denied media speculation about the government's imminent attempt to privatize state-run corporations in charge of supplying gas, water and electricity and health insurance services.

"The construction of a pan-Korea grand waterway was part of my presidential election pledge, but I'm ready to give up the project if it is opposed by the people. I have freshly realized that any government policy, if not supported by the people, would not be successful."

Regarding the privatization policy, Lee said his government will gradually enforce the public sector reform after consulting public opinions, but denied any speculation about post-privatization surges in utility rates and layoffs.

As expected, Lee's apology drew mixed responses from rival parties and civic activists. "The president says we should trust the United States," said Jang Dae-hyun, a lead organizer of the People's Association Against Mad Cow Disease. "There were no substantial measures that people have asked for. Such assurances alone are ineffective. It's very disappointing."

Civic groups and some experts say voluntary regulations alone cannot ensure that beef from cattle older than 30 months is not imported. Older cattle are believed to be more susceptible to mad cow disease. They accused the government of failing to mention specified risk materials (SRMs), known to carry the greatest risk of transferring mad cow disease to humans, such as as tongues, brains, part of the intestines and vertebrae marrow.

Critics say SRMs should be entirely banned and the age limit should be toughened to restrict cattle older than 20 months of age.

"It was not surprising," Joon Sang-jin, a sociology professor at Sogang University, said. "He bowed down once again, apologized once again, but there was nothing that changed."

Lee's Grand National Party, meanwhile, urged the government to "renew" itself on the occasion of the public apology.

"We look forward to seeing a new government with new Cabinet members and sufficient countermeasures on US beef imports," said the party's spokeswoman Jo Yoon-sun.

The party also urged opposition parties to end their boycott of the new parliament to work alongside the "newborn government." Three opposition parties have been boycotting the newly launched parliament since May 30, demanding the ruling party cooperate in amending a local law to secure stricter import terms on US beef.

By contrast, the main opposition United Democratic Party denounced Lee's apology as lacking in substance.

"We hope the president's apology will not prove to be superficial," said Ja Young, spokesperson for the main opposition party. "Actual measures must be presented to back the apology."