

South Korea Lifts U.S. Beef Ban Amid Protest Rallies

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South Korea lifted a ban on U.S. beef imports, escalating a standoff with street protesters who say the meat isn't safe and have called on President Lee Myung Bak to resign.

About 5,300 metric tons of frozen U.S. beef in storage may reach shelves two to four days after importers seek approval from health officials, the Agricultural Ministry said today. No inspections are scheduled for today and the ministry declined to say when they will begin.

"The government is determined to safeguard the people's dinner table," Lee told ministers at a meeting in Seoul, according to his spokesman Lee Dong Kwan. "Now is a time to put the beef issue behind us and focus our nation's efforts on reviving the economy."

Renewing beef exports to South Korea, previously the third- biggest market for American meat, may pave the way for a \$29 billion free trade deal. As many as 80,000 people have demonstrated against the resumption, undermining Lee's popularity, which has fallen by half since he took office.

"We don't trust the government's assurances any more," said Kwak No Chung, a spokesman for the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, outside the entrance to a frozen storage facility in Yongin, outside Seoul. "We are prepared to forcibly prevent inspectors from entering this facility if we need to."

Yongin Rally

As many as 100 protesters rallied in Yongin and in front of ports in Busan, where the frozen meat is stored. South Korean beef sellers will ask the government to inspect the stored meat today, said Park Chang Kyu, president of A-Meat, which represents 120 importers. U.S. beef could be on sale early next week, he said.

South Korean police detained about 130 people in overnight clashes in Seoul over the imports. Scuffles resulted in injuries to police and demonstrators, a spokesman at the Jongno Police Station command center said. Some protesters were released early today, while others remain in custody and are being questioned at various locations.

More than 3,000 protesters paraded along the 12-lane Sejong Avenue last night, shouting "The war has begun!" Police used water cannons and shields to drive them back.

The South Korean government today posted a notice on the import resumption in its official government gazette, the final bureaucratic hurdle before shipments begin. The government announced its intentions yesterday after the U.S. agreed June 21 to guarantee a private industry accord to export beef only from animals younger than 30 months.

Agreement Delays

South Korea delayed lifting the import ban three times after an April commitment to restart the trade prompted daily rallies by tens of thousands of protesters.

“We look forward to the resumption of shipments of safe, affordable and high quality U.S. beef to Korea,” U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab said in an e-mailed statement. “We urge Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China to join Korea and others in reopening their beef markets based on science and internationally recognized guidelines and standards.”

South Korea barred imports in 2003 when the U.S. discovered its first case of mad cow disease. The ban was lifted in 2006 for boneless cuts from young cows and reinstated in October after bone fragments were found in some meat.

Mad cow disease is a brain-wasting livestock illness that scientists say is spread in cattle by tainted animal feed. Eating contaminated meat from infected animals can cause a fatal human variant that has been blamed for the deaths of 151 people in the U.K., where it was first reported in the 1980s. Beef from cows younger than 30 months is thought to be at lower risk for the disease.

‘Nothing to Worry About’

“The government will strictly observe origin labeling, inspection guidelines and other measures to ensure the health of the public,” Prime Minister Han Seung Soo said in a televised address today. “We will make sure the people have nothing more to worry about.”

As many as 80,000 protesters have held daily candlelight vigils in downtown Seoul to demand Lee resign over his handling of the issue. Lee fired all but one of his top aides on June 20 to counter the public backlash and plans to shuffle his cabinet.

Lee agreed in April to allow American beef after U.S. legislators such as Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, a Democrat from Montana, said they wouldn't ratify a bilateral free trade agreement before Korea opened its market.

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