

# **S.Korean workers strike, priests join protests against US beef**

July 2, 2008

Agence France-Presse

SEOUL — Tens of thousands of South Koreans staged work stoppages Wednesday in protest at US beef imports as President Lee Myung-Bak's government struggled with an economic downturn.

The militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) said 136,000 people were staging partial strikes from Wednesday, adding that these included 44,000 at the largest automaker Hyundai Motor and 29,000 at its affiliate Kia Motors.

The labour ministry said 90,000 workers nationwide were taking part.

Lee and top aides agreed that the government should "sternly deal with the illegal, politically motivated strike," a presidential spokesman said.

Religious leaders joined weeks of street protests as Lee strove to end the rallies, which were sparked by fears of mad cow disease but are now increasingly driven by liberal opponents of his new conservative government.

"The government calls it illegal but we don't agree with it. We have every right to protect our health," KCTU president Lee Suk-Haeng told journalists on Wednesday.

"We also plan to stage a full-scale consumers' boycott campaign against US beef."

A Hyundai Motor spokesman said half of some 44,000 workers laid down tools for two hours during the day shift. Production of 2,000 vehicles worth some 30 million dollars was expected to be lost in Wednesday's stoppage and another two-hour break planned for early Thursday.

The KCTU said thousands of others would stage a four-hour strike on Thursday. It said tens of thousands of members plan to travel to Seoul late Friday to join candlelight protests against the beef imports on Saturday.

The government is pushing ahead with the distribution of US beef, saying extra negotiations with Washington this month fully addressed public fears over mad cow disease.

Park Chang-Gyu, who heads an association of beef importers, said he sold 400 kilograms (880 pounds) of US beef Tuesday, a day after quarantine officials completed meat inspections and authorised sales.

The office of Prime Minister Han Seung-Soo bought 12 kilograms. "The prime minister himself, his wife and their three-year-old grandson ate this beef for dinner last night," a spokesman said.

Seoul agreed in April to resume the US beef imports, which were halted in 2003 after a US mad cow case, so it can push ahead with a wider trade deal.

After mass rallies, it negotiated extra beef safeguards and called for the protests to stop, saying they are damaging the economy. The finance ministry Wednesday cut its growth forecast for 2008 in response to high oil prices.

But the rallies, some of them violent, continued. More than 200 people were injured overnight Saturday and police vowed a crackdown on illegal demonstrations.

In a new twist, Catholic priests, Buddhist monks and Protestant pastors this week joined the candlelit protests.

"The flames of the candlelit protests, which had been fluttering out, are being rekindled by some liberal religious leaders," said Hong Joon-Pyo, parliamentary leader of the ruling Grand National Party.

Officials of a leading protest group called the People's Association for Measures against Mad Cow Disease insisted the protests are not anti-American. But they said Korea lacked the means to ensure US beef is safe.

"A sincere apology from President Lee and re-negotiation (of the beef import pact) is the only way to stop candlelit rallies," said one, Nam In-Soon.