

South Koreans boost anti-US beef protests

By Hyung-Jin Kim
Associated Press
June 5, 2008

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA - South Koreans increased pressure on the government Thursday to renegotiate a beef deal with the United States as opposition lawmakers boycotted the legislature and thousands launched a three-day protest.

Public outcry against the April 18 beef import pact with Washington has increasingly cornered the government of President Lee Myung-bak. On Thursday, Lee was forced to cancel a traditional opening speech at the National Assembly because of an opposition boycott of the legislature.

The deal to resume imports of U.S. beef has faced heavy public opposition because of widespread perceptions that it fails to protect the nation from mad [cow disease](#) by allowing beef from older U.S. cattle, considered at greater risk of the brain-wasting illness.

Opponents have held daily street protests demanding that the pact be scrapped or renegotiated.

Washington's ambassador to Seoul, meanwhile, apologized for comments earlier this week seen by some South Koreans as insulting.

On Tuesday, Alexander Vershbow said he hoped South Koreans would "learn more about the science" after stressing that the safety of American beef is scientifically proven. "I regret that my comments have been interpreted in a way that caused offense to some Koreans," the envoy said in a statement. "I have the highest regard for the educational level of Koreans and respect their concerns about [food safety](#)."

In a concession earlier this week, Lee's government said it had asked the United States to refrain from exporting any beef from cattle 30 months of age or older. Still, it stopped short of directly asking Washington for a renegotiation and failed to calm public anger. Japan, which has also tussled with Washington over beef imports after the discovery of mad cow disease in the U.S. in 2003, only allows meat from U.S. cattle aged 20 months or younger to enter the country.

Opposition parties and protesters say they would accept nothing less than a renegotiation, something Washington has so far indicated it is not prepared to do. Protesters accuse Lee of treating their concerns about food safety with disdain while kowtowing to the United States.

A planned three-day protest kicked off Thursday evening with about 8,000 demonstrators rallying in central Seoul, holding candles and anti-government signs. Organizers plan to continue the rally through Sunday.

Earlier in the day, a 56-year-old South Korean man set himself on fire after taking part in rallies opposing the beef deal, police said. The man, only identified as Kim, was in critical condition, they said. No further details were available.

In April 2007, a South Korean taxi driver died after setting himself on fire outside a Seoul hotel where U.S. and South Korean negotiators were in the final stage of hammering out a free trade agreement.

U.S. beef has been banned from South Korea for most of the past four and a half years since the first case of mad cow disease in the U.S. was discovered in late 2003. Two subsequent cases were found.

Scientists believe the disease spreads when farmers feed cattle recycled meat and bones from infected animals. The U.S. banned recycled feeds in 1997.

In humans, eating meat products contaminated with the illness is linked to variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a rare and fatal malady.

Associated Press writer Jae-soon Chang contributed to this report.