

Labor party hogties FTA debate

By Kim Min-hee
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The Democratic Labor Party yesterday blocked a parliamentary committee from deliberating a bill on the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement.

Members of the minor party blocked Rep. Kim Won-wung, chairman of the National Assembly Committee on Unification, Foreign Affairs and Trade, from entering the committee chamber, preventing him from convening the session.

The FTA deal is strongly opposed by farmers who fear losing their livelihoods if cheaper foreign agricultural imports start flooding in.

The DLP claims to represent workers, farmers and other social minorities.

The Grand National Party has been seeking to settle the motion before President-elect Lee Myung-bak takes office on Feb. 25.

Lee has been keen for a speedy ratification of the FTA. He previously said he would push for a full opening of the domestic market to U.S. beef ahead of his expected summit with U.S. President George Bush in the coming months.

Last June, the two countries concluded negotiations on the bilateral FTA and are now seeking its ratification by their respective legislative bodies. The United States has been pressuring Korea to fully open its market to U.S. beef - including cuts of meat that local civic groups claim are linked to mad cow disease - as a condition for ratification on their side.

The pro-government United New Democratic Party had claimed to back the bill in principle but most lawmakers favor putting the vote off till after the parliamentary elections, afraid it could cost them support from groups that oppose the FTA.

Sohn Hak-kyu, the UNDP chief, has publicly supported the FTA deal several times but has toned down his comments recently, reflecting his party's opinion.

The bill also faces opposition by lawmakers from rural districts. The bill has been sitting in the National Assembly since September last year and there have been mounting calls to gather public opinion through hearings before any decision is made.

With the launch of the new administration and April elections around the corner, a failure to begin the deliberation process in February means the bill could be put off till June, analysts say.

The leader of a hard-line union group yesterday embarked on a four-day trip to the United States to discuss joint action with U.S. labor groups on blocking the ratification of a free trade agreement between the two countries.

Lee Suk-haeng, president of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, is expected to meet U.S. union leaders and politicians, said its spokesperson Woo Moon-sook.

"The U.S. labor unions are also against the Korea-U.S. free trade pact, and we have been closely planning joint actions with our U.S. counterpart to nullify the deal ever since the launch of free trade agreement negotiations with the U.S. in February 2006," she said.

Lee is scheduled to meet with Sander Levin, Democrat chairman of the House Trade subcommittee, John Sweeney, president of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, and Anna Burger, Change to Win Federation president, during his visit.

The KCTU has met with U.S. labor groups frequently but this is the first time that its president is taking part in the talks, Woo said.