

Korean, U.S. lawmakers ask for changes to FTA

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A group of United States congressmen yesterday sent a letter drafted with their legislative counterparts in Korea to Presidents Barack Obama and Lee Myung-bak urging the renegotiation of the U.S.-Korea bilateral free trade agreement, according to a U.S. trade online magazine.

The Korean lawmakers, all from the opposition, confirmed the report and said they will send the same letter to the two presidents soon.

It is the first time lawmakers from both countries verbalized opposition to the pact using the same words, a move that could bolster support for American opponents of the deal, who say the pact is unfair to U.S. beef and car companies. Analysts said it may be the start of more joint opposition to what would be one of the world's biggest free trade agreements.

Jang Hyung-chul, chief secretary for Democratic Party Representative Chung Dong-young, told the Korea JoongAng Daily that the letter was drafted in coordination with Representative Mike Michaud and 20 other U.S. congressmen and 35 Korean lawmakers including Chung. Earlier yesterday, World Trade Online reported on its Web site that the letter signed by the 56 lawmakers was sent.

The letter calls for restrictions on certain service industries and a revision of provisions on a dispute settlement mechanism involving foreign companies. Beef and auto provisions, the main stumbling block to the ratification of the pact on the U.S. side, were not mentioned.

"We believe that trade agreements should foster balanced and fair economic exchange between two countries," the letter read. "Moreover, they should be tools for alleviating poverty, advocating economic justice, promoting healthy communities, advancing human rights and protecting the environment. We urge you to modify the agreement to reflect these ideals and craft the first, true 21st Century Free Trade Agreement."

The FTA, signed in 2007, is yet to be ratified by legislatures in both countries. The news came as the Obama administration is signaling its desire to renegotiate the auto and beef clauses of the FTA in the face of growing protectionism sentiment in the U.S.

"We assume the renegotiation will be made, and when they reopen the talks, we want

them to reflect our call for more meaningful changes to the underlying text,” Jang said.

In a forum held in Seoul yesterday, Trade Minister Kim Jong-hoon reiterated that renegotiation is not an option for Korea.

“The U.S. wants to take one or two things back,” Kim said. “But the thing is, when you start taking things back, it’s like a Pandora’s box. This government’s position is that we should stick to the agreement we reached. And our position is that time is on our side.”

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