

## **SKorea, US to hold more negotiations in beef row**

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SEOUL -- South Korea's trade minister said Thursday he would visit the United States this week for more negotiations on a US beef import deal which has sparked massive street protests in Seoul.

Kim Jong-Hoon told a press conference he would leave Friday and expected to meet US Trade Representative Susan Schwab the same day, to discuss additional safeguards against mad cow disease.

He said he planned "additional negotiations... to seek ways not to bring in cattle more than 30 months old, to dissipate public concerns amid massive protest rallies."

Public anger at the April decision to resume the imports led to a month of mass street protests, culminating in a candlelit rally by some 100,000 people in Seoul on Tuesday evening.

The entire cabinet offered its resignation Tuesday, less than four months after embattled President Lee Myung-Bak began his term. He is expected soon to announce a reshuffle to take the heat out of the political crisis.

South Korea suspended its multi-million dollar imports of US beef in 2003 after a mad cow case in the United States.

It signed a deal in April to resume most imports. But opponents claim the meat could expose Koreans to the human form of mad cow disease.

The Seoul government refuses to seek a formal renegotiation of the beef deal, as opponents demand. It says this would jeopardise a separate wider free trade agreement (FTA) and cast doubt on Seoul's good faith as a negotiator.

But it is seeking a voluntary agreement not to export older US cattle which are seen as carrying a greater risk of exposure to the disease.

"My mission is to discuss how a voluntary agreement among private companies would be implemented practically and efficiently," Kim said.

"In the process of doing so, I think the government should play a role in one way or another."

US ambassador Alexander Vershbow raised hopes of an agreement following a controversy which has seen Lee's approval ratings fall below 20 percent.

"I think some additional understandings are likely to emerge in coming days that can address concerns specifically regarding imports of beef from cattle over 30 months in age," Yonhap news agency quoted him as telling a forum.

US lawmakers say they cannot ratify the FTA, which Seoul sees as crucial to its economic future, until the beef market is opened up. Washington says the risk of mad cow disease is non-existent.

Until 2003 South Korea was the world's third-largest buyer of US beef with imports worth 850 million dollars a year.

Over the past week or so, the beef protests widened into anti-government rallies with demonstrators calling on Lee to quit.

The conservative former construction executive known for his hard-driving style has promised to be "more humble" in listening to the people.

On Wednesday, the government and ruling party agreed to delay a huge and hugely unpopular bid to build an inland waterway across the peninsula and said it would put privatisations on hold.

Officials said they would focus on policies to support low wage-earners battered by soaring prices for oil and other raw materials.