

Legislators: U.S. negative on beef renegotiation with S Korea

Xinhua
June 15, 2008

SEOUL -- The United States remains negative on renegotiating its beef deal with Seoul and may move to link the issue with a separate trade pact in the worst case scenario, legislators of South Korea's ruling party said Sunday.

A team of Grand National Party (GNP) lawmakers returned home from a five-day trip to Washington on Saturday after delivering South Koreans' growing safety concerns over U.S. beef and discussing solutions with Congressional leaders and cattle raisers there.

"The United States appeared firmly against renegotiating the terms that have already been agreed upon by the two countries," said Rep. Hwang Jin-ha, who led the GNP delegation.

Hwang quoted some U.S. lawmakers as saying that the U.S. Congress may be forced to link the beef issue with a South Korea-U.S. free trade agreement (FTA), especially its auto sector.

The South Korean legislators' trip to Washington came amid intensifying local protests demanding nullification and renegotiation of an April 18 bilateral accord with Washington, under which South Korea will almost fully reopen its market to U.S. beef despite lingering health concerns about mad cow disease.

Struggling to overcome growing public discontent, President Lee Myung-bak is pushing for an agreement between U.S. exporters and South Korean importers, blocking meat from cattle over 30 months old from entering South Korea.

The trade ministers of the two countries met in Washington Friday and Saturday but failed to find a compromise.

The beef deal, originally scheduled to be put into effect on May 15, has is now on hold due to intensifying domestic protests.

Thousands of South Koreans have taken to the streets almost daily in the past several weeks, demanding nullification of the accord.

Local business groups have been raising concerns that Seoul's prolonged standoff over the beef deal may force it to make concessions in auto and textile trade under the FTA. The FTA, signed under the former Roh Moo-hyun government, has yet to be approved by the legislatures of both countries.

"Most of the officials we met expressed disapproval over the delay in Seoul's resumption of beef imports," Hwang said, adding "they also appeared concerned that the current trouble with Seoul may set a bad example for its future trade deals with other countries."

South Korea banned imports of U.S. beef after a case of mad cow disease was found in Washington state in 2003. Two more cases of the brain-wasting disease were later found.

Before the 2003 import ban, South Korea was the United States' third largest beef market after Japan and Canada.

Editor: Amber Yao