

US, South Korean officials end beef talks

By Foster Klug, Associated Press Writer
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WASHINGTON -- The top U.S. and South Korean trade envoys broke off talks Sunday without resolving a crisis over the resumption of American beef shipments that has shaken South Korea's pro-U.S. government.

South Korean Trade Minister Kim Jong-hoon, who flew into Washington on Friday for discussions, was returning home, U.S. Trade Representative spokeswoman Gretchen Hamel said.

However, in Seoul, South Korea's Foreign Ministry issued a statement Monday saying the envoys had agreed to continue talking and that Kim, who was scheduled to head home, would instead remain in Washington.

The ministry said the U.S. had requested the talks continue. There was no immediate response from the U.S. Trade Representative's office, which late Sunday said the talks had ended.

Kim and Susan Schwab, the U.S. trade envoy, held "frank and candid discussions" Friday and Saturday, Hamel said, but, "in order to find a mutually acceptable solution, both sides need more time to look into technical issues."

She said officials from the countries will stay in contact.

The talks, which focused on the importation of U.S. beef from cattle below 30 months of age, came as thousands of people protested in Seoul, demanding that a beef import deal settled in April be renegotiated and urging South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to resign.

Lee has vowed not to allow the import of beef from cattle older than 30 months. Scientists think infection levels of mad cow disease increase with age.

The South Korean Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the "two sides agreed to cooperate to produce a solution that can satisfy each other." Seoul and Washington needed more time to work out effective measures for beef imports, the ministry said.

The Bush administration has said that it will not renegotiate an accord that was supposed to have settled a major irritant in ties between the allies. But Washington has said it supports beef packaging labels that would show the ages of slaughtered cows.

Lee said he has received a positive reply from the U.S. on measures under which the American beef industry would voluntarily not ship meat from cattle older than 30 months. Lee called the voluntary restraint the most rational measure to resolve the beef dispute.

American beef processors have said they are willing to label beef shipments bound for South Korea.

South Korea was the third-largest overseas market for U.S. beef until it banned imports after a case of mad cow disease was detected in 2003, the first of three confirmed cases in the United States.

Seoul's agreement to reopen its market for U.S. beef, which came just hours before Lee held his first summit with President Bush, was widely seen as a concession aimed at getting the United States to approve a broader free trade deal.

Both Seoul and Washington have repeatedly insisted that U.S. beef is safe, citing the Paris-based World Organization for Animal Health. But Lee has come under intense public fire for allegedly ignoring concerns over the safety of U.S. beef.

The entire South Korean Cabinet offered to resign last week in an apparent attempt to dampen public anger, but late-night vigils and street rallies have continued.

A crowd estimated by police at about 2,000 rallied Sunday night near the city hall and marched through Seoul.

Mad cow disease is the common term for a brain-wasting disease in cattle called bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE. In people, eating meat contaminated with BSE is linked to variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, a rare and deadly nerve disease.

Associated Press Writer Kwang-tae Kim in Seoul contributed to this report.