

President Appeals for Ending Beef Row

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President Lee Myung-bak said Thursday that now is the time to end the dispute over U.S. beef imports and devote national energy to revitalizing the economy.

He made the remarks in a meeting with related Cabinet ministers after the government formally announced the resumption of U.S. beef imports.

Opposition parties and street protestors defined Lee's remark as a critical challenge to the people. The main opposition United Democratic Party (UDP) and the Liberty Forward Party (LFP) said the ministerial notice to restart the imports is against the law.

They plan to take legal action, including filing an administrative suit, against relevant ministries.

The Democratic Labor Party (DLP) said, "The Lee administration has taken its first step toward death. We, along with the people, will fight the war."

But the governing Grand National Party defended President Lee, adding that ending the beef row is inevitable for the stability of the administration.

Prime Minister Han Seung-soo appealed to the people to end protests against the restarting of American beef imports.

He said the extra accord with Washington may not be perfect but the government did its best to safeguard the people's health.

The prime minister said ending the dispute is necessary for fast ratification of the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement (FTA).

In a nationally televised statement, Han said, "(U.S. presidential candidate) Obama is even opposing the FTA. This means Korea is a tough negotiation partner on the international stage."

The President and Cabinet ministers discussed ways of publicizing the safety of U.S. beef, as well as the government's counteraction against MBC's allegedly intentional spreading of mad cow fears via a recent documentary, presidential spokesman Lee Dong-kwan said.

Activists protesting the government's resumption of American beef imports clashed with

police in Seoul Thursday night.

Civic groups and labor unions vowed to continue the struggle till the administration withdraws the publication for renegotiation of the deal with Washington.

While candlelight protests appear to be losing steam, participants are becoming increasingly violent.

Police predicted this weekend would be a watershed for the candlelight protests as many college students are leaving for voluntary services in rural areas.

The People's Association for Measures Against Mad Cow Disease said resumption of beef imports is a proclamation of "war against Korean citizens."

Park Won-seok, a leader of a coalition of civic groups, said they would struggle against the Lee administration.

The coalition plans massive candlelight protests over the weekend to call for the withdrawal of the decision to resume U.S. beef imports and Lee's resignation.

Some 300 members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), one of the nation's largest umbrella groups with more than 500,000 members, Thursday blocked roads leading to six warehouses in Busan and 12 in southern Gyeonggi Province to stop U.S. beef that has been stocked there for months being transported to consumers.

KCTU started a strike at 5 p.m., Thursday for an anti-US beef campaign. The union claimed more than 10,000 members participated in the indefinite strike.

Hundreds of riot police were dispatched to the scenes to prevent possible conflict between union members and warehouse employees.

"We will deal strictly with any illegal rallies by KCTU members, including occupation of roads or obstruction of transport," a police officer said. He added police would arrest illegal and violent protesters on the spot.

Meanwhile, some 100 protesters Wednesday gathered in front of the Gyeongbokgung subway station to oppose the scheduled publication next day. Police detained more than 120 demonstrators who illegally occupied the roads leading to the Presidential Office, the largest number of protesters arrested in a day since the candlelight protests began early last month.

Police hauled away 139 demonstrators, of whom 134 were under investigation Thursday. Over the past month, a total of 746 people have been taken by police, with six being arrested. Police said 56 riot policemen were injured and six police buses were damaged.

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