

SKorea gets tough on beef protesters

AFP

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SEOUL — South Korean police on Monday took a harder line against protests over US beef imports which have disrupted the capital for weeks, raiding the offices of civic groups and detaining 130 people.

The country's top prosecutor said the candlelit protests, originally sparked by fears of cow disease, have been hijacked by violent radicals.

"Candlelit rallies, deviating from their original purity, are changing into illegal and radical violence, and if they are left alone society could slip into an irrecoverable state of chaos," prosecutor-general Lim Chai-Jin said in a statement.

He called a meeting of prosecutors to discuss ways to curb violent protests and slanderous Internet postings which have fuelled demonstrations.

Prosecutors said 111 police buses had been damaged and 372 riot policemen injured in recent weeks.

"We should never fail to bring forces which commit illegal and violent acts behind the cover of innocent citizens to justice," Lim said.

Government supporters say the rallies are increasingly being taken over by anti-American and anti-government groups, including nationalist opponents of a planned free trade agreement with the United States.

More than 200 were hurt in street battles overnight Saturday, as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was visiting Seoul.

As part of an apparent new policy, police blocked a protest scheduled for Sunday evening at Seoul City Hall plaza before it could start. They said they subsequently detained 130 people, mostly for blocking nearby roads.

At dawn Monday investigators raided the office of the People's Association for Measures Against Mad Cow Disease and the office of the People's Solidarity for Korean Progress, a city police spokesman said.

They seized computers and items such as flags and loudspeakers and arrested one organiser.

Police have put eight protest leaders on the wanted list for organising violent demonstrations.

The government's decision in April to resume US beef imports, which were halted in 2003 after a mad cow case in the United States, sparked weeks of mass rallies which put new President Lee Myung-Bak under pressure.

He twice apologised for his handling of the beef issue. The government suspended the import plan until it secured extra health safeguards in negotiations with Washington. Now conservatives are urging him to get tougher.

JoongAng Ilbo newspaper, in an editorial headlined "Anarchy in the Republic," called for a strong response. Former conservative president Kim Young-Sam made a similar appeal. "The nation is now headed toward a state of lawlessness and anarchy," he was quoted by Yonhap news agency as saying.

A survey by Chosun Ilbo newspaper said 57 percent of respondents oppose continuing candlelit vigils while 38 percent are in favour.

Some 67 percent said the vigils were being used for political purposes, according to the survey of 1,013 people.

Protests have turned more violent since the government last week authorised the resumption of the imports after the new beef deal with the US.

The People's Association for Measures Against Mad Cow Disease said the raid on its offices was "nothing but a childish plot to portray... the civic groups as illegal organisations in order to separate them from ordinary citizens."

Quarantine authorities said 85 tons of frozen US beef -- out of some 5,300 tons already in cold storage awaiting clearance -- had been inspected and could be shipped to consumers Monday.

The militant Korea Confederation of Trade Union said it sent members to warehouses nationwide to try to block shipments.

Metalworkers' unions affiliated to the KCTU said up to 130,000 workers in the auto and other industries would strike for two hours Wednesday, to protest at US beef imports and to press management in wage talks.