

South Korean President Fires 3 Cabinet Ministers

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SEOUL, South Korea -- President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea dismissed three ministers on Monday in a cabinet reshuffle aimed at restoring public trust in his four-month-old government which has been shaken by weeks of protests against American beef imports.

The agriculture, health and education ministers who were replaced Monday have been under fire as South Koreans rallied almost daily to protest the government's decision in April to lift a ban on beef imported from the United States.

The initial protests, triggered by fears of mad cow disease, quickly evolved into a broader platform to express grievances against Mr. Lee's policies on education, the economy and other issues.

"Today's cabinet reshuffle is designed to give the government a new image and help overcome difficult internal and external situations with a new resolve," said Lee Dong-kwan, the chief presidential spokesman.

The entire cabinet, including the prime minister, offered to resign last month as Mr. Lee's approval ratings dipped below 20 percent.

The president apologized for the unpopular beef deal twice and replaced most of his presidential aides last month.

But his office said on Monday that Mr. Lee decided to retain his main economic ministers to ensure stability and continuity in policies as the country battles high oil prices and inflation that threaten to drag down Asia's fourth-largest economy.

Mr. Lee was elected in December on promises that he would revive the economy. But the government recently slashed its 2008 economic growth target to a three-year low of 4.7 percent from 6 percent.

"It's a stopgap measure and shows President Lee's arrogance in ignoring the people's desire again," said Cha Young, the spokesman for the main opposition United Democratic Party, which has been demanding a sweeping cabinet overhaul.

On Saturday, about 50,000 people protested peacefully in Seoul, despite Mr. Lee's repeated appeals to South Koreans to stop the demonstrations and let his government focus on coping with oil prices.