Bush tells Lee he will push free trade pact: Seoul spokesman

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TOYAKO, Japan — US President George W. Bush reaffirmed Wednesday that he will try to win approval for a sweeping free trade agreement with South Korea before leaving office, a Seoul official said.

His promise came during talks with South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak on the sidelines of a Group of Eight summit, said Lee's spokesman Lee Dong-Kwan.

President Lee has endured a torrid time in office since he first met Bush at Camp David in April.

An agreement to resume US beef imports was signed on the eve of that summit in hopes of pushing forward with the wider free trade agreement (FTA).

But the deal sparked weeks of mass street protests in Seoul over the supposed dangers of mad cow disease, rocking Lee's new government.

Bush had words of consolation, telling Lee the difficulties he faced in his first year in office would prove beneficial in the long term, the spokesman said.

In an attempt to calm the protests, Seoul went back to Washington to negotiate extra health safeguards on beef. The two leaders agreed faithfully to abide by those terms, South Korean officials said.

The FTA was signed last year but must be ratified by the legislatures of both countries. The two leaders both pledged to try to secure this by year-end.

They also stressed the need for North Korea completely to abandon its weapons programme, South Korean officials said.

The leaders met for just 30 minutes rather than the scheduled hour. Officials quoted by Yonhap news agency said this was because they were of like mind on all the issues and because they would meet again soon.

Bush is to visit South Korea on August 5-6.

"Bush displayed a friendly gesture towards Lee by personally introducing him to the Group of Eight leaders ahead of the opening of the expanded G-8 summit," said Lee's spokesman.

"Bush also said he has been impressed to learn recently about Lee's years-long volunteer work in the past as a parking lot attendant for his church."