

South Korea Deploys 16,000 Police to Contain Protests (Update1)

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Bloomberg
August 5, 2008

South Korea deployed 16,000 police to prevent protesters opposed to U.S. beef imports from disrupting a visit by President George W. Bush.

AntiMadCow, the group that led two months of candle-lit vigils against South Korean President Lee Myung Bak's resumption of imports, held demonstrations in central Seoul today. Riot police used water cannons and detained protesters when they tried to block traffic. The pro-U.S. New Right National Union, which rallied 400 meters away didn't march or clash with police. Bush arrived in Seoul this evening and is scheduled to meet with Lee tomorrow before heading to Thailand and then Beijing for the Olympic Games.

``We will maintain our principle of a strict crackdown on any illegal actions during rallies," Police Commissioner Eo Cheong Soo told reporters in Seoul earlier today. ``We will be on full alert to ensure the utmost safety of the visiting head of state."

Lee's actions angered food and consumer groups concerned about the possible spread of mad cow disease, triggering wider protests against his government and leadership style. Lee's approval rating tumbled by more than half in the first four months of his term, which began Feb. 25.

Bush's Hotel

An additional 7,000 police officers and special forces will guard the hotel where Bush and his wife are staying, the National Police Agency said.

Anti-U.S. protesters were not evident on the road from Seoul Airbase to the hotel. Several people held pro-U.S. signs, including one that read ``Good Luck to You President Bush" and another that read ``Friends Forever."

``Rallies in South Korea are a sign of a mature democracy," Dennis Wilder, the Asia director for the White House National Security Council, told reporters on Air Force One. ``We have no problem at all with the fact that the South Korean people want to provide their opinion."

South Korea barred U.S. beef imports in 2003 when the U.S. discovered its first case of mad cow disease. The ban was lifted in 2006 for boneless cuts from young cows and

reinstated in October after bone fragments were found in some meat. South Korea resumed imports June 26.

A-Meat, a representative for 120 importers, began selling the meat in small quantities to consumers, which sold out within hours, it said.

`In the Pudding'

``I think the real proof is in the pudding, and in this case the pudding is the consumer in South Korea." Wilder said. ``The South Korean people are indicating that they find American beef both well-priced and safe."

South Korea bought 246,595 tons of U.S. beef valued at \$815 million in 2003, making it the third-biggest export market for the meat after Japan and Mexico. Lee agreed to restart imports in a bid to push a \$29 billion free-trade agreement through the legislature of both nations. The two leaders will likely discuss the matter during a meeting tomorrow in Seoul.

``We have told (the South Koreans) that we are going to work very hard, that American business coalitions will work very hard on their behalf, but there are no guarantees that we can get this through the Congress this year," Wilder said.

The two leaders will also discuss their efforts within the six-nation forum with China, Japan and Russia to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program.

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