

Renegotiate Beef Deal

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It's Time to Reach National Consensus on Key Issues

The Lee Myung-bak administration has given in to the public backlash over the beef trade deal with the United States, requesting Washington not to export beef from cattle older than 30 months. The request came as the one-month-long demonstrations against the April 18 beef market opening accord have turned into an anti-government campaign. It is apparent that policymakers have no other choice but to acknowledge public fears about mad cow disease.

It is fortunate that President Lee and his staff have come to respect people's voices against the "unfair and shameful" deal which they claim could sacrifice their health. The administration did not realize the seriousness of the beef row until young students, parents, company workers and other citizens tried to march to the presidential office in Seoul over the weekend, shouting anti-government slogans. The Lee leadership belatedly felt a sense of crisis as the protests spread to other cities around the country.

On Tuesday, Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-chun announced a government decision to suspend imports of U.S. beef until an additional agreement is struck with Washington to ban beef from cattle older than 30 months. Therefore, the planned resumption of U.S. beef imports will be inevitably delayed until after the two countries reach a new or additional agreement. However, it is not clear if the government is seeking renegotiations with the U.S. or making some changes to the deal.

Now, the U.S. holds the key to helping the beleaguered Lee administration solve the beef issue. The Washington government has so far made clear that there will be no renegotiations. Amid mounting protests over the mad cow scare, the two countries already reached an additional agreement that will enable Seoul to immediately ban U.S. beef imports if mad cow disease is confirmed in American cattle. However, the demonstrators have continued to call for renegotiations to allow only beef from cattle younger than 30 months.

U.S. Ambassador to Korea Alexander Vershbow reaffirmed his government's firm position Tuesday, saying that there was no need to renegotiate the beef deal. There is little doubt that Washington is unwilling to make some concessions to Seoul as far as the deal is concerned. However, it is not easy for the U.S. government to ignore South Koreans' uproar over American beef imports that might trigger anti-American sentiment.

In this situation, the Korean government is reportedly seeking to have U.S. beef exporters voluntarily refrain from shipping beef from cattle older than 30 months. However, critics pointed out that the "voluntary export restraint" is only a stopgap measure, claiming that there is no solution other than renegotiations. They said it is necessary for Washington to

take more proactive action to ease Koreans' concerns about mad cow disease.

Five U.S. meat processors, including Tyson Foods and Cargill Meat Solutions Corp., have offered to label their shipments to South Korea. They announced that the labels would show whether the cattle were younger or older than 30 months when slaughtered. But labeling is unlikely to provide a solution to the problem.

We hope that Seoul and Washington will hold renegotiations to set new trade conditions that will satisfy both the Korean people and American cattle breeders. Even more important is that the two countries will make their utmost efforts to prevent the beef row from developing into bilateral trade friction. Besides, the Lee government should learn how to build national consensus and restore public trust in the beef market opening as well as other important issues, including the controversial cross-country canal project.