

US Envoy Advised to Speak Carefully

By Kang Hyun-kyung, Staff Reporter
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Grand National Party (GNP) Chairman Kang Jae-sup asked U.S. Ambassador to Korea Alexander Vershbow to be more careful in his choice of words commenting on sensitive issues such as the American beef import deal, a party spokesman said Thursday.

Vershbow, however, denied accusations that he had tried to play down or ridicule the concerns of the South Korean public.

"I regret that my comments have been interpreted in a way that caused offense to some Koreans," he said in a statement released late Thursday.

"I have the highest regard for the educational level of Koreans and respect their concerns about food safety. I am working very hard on ways to address the Korean public's concerns and build confidence in the safety of U.S. beef," he added.

Kang told Vershbow at a meeting in Seoul, "I believe every word you say as ambassador counts as Koreans consider you a source of information," the spokesman said.

Kang is not the first to offer advice to the chief U.S. envoy and his staff to be careful in their selection of words on sensitive bilateral issues.

A government source, who declined to be identified, said the administration has asked the U.S. embassy to pay extra attention when high-ranking U.S. officials speak on key issues as an unexamined remark could fan anti-American sentiment here.

Kang invited Vershbow to his office at the National Assembly Thursday to ask him to inform leaders in the United States that Washington needs to review additional measures to supplement the beef deal signed with Seoul in April as the backlash against it is seemingly out of control.

The meeting was not open to the press, except for a brief pre-event statement.

After the meeting, GNP Spokeswoman Cho Yoon-sun told reporters that Vershbow was said to have been embarrassed by the way the media had handled his remarks made following his meeting with Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan, Tuesday.

The ambassador was quoted as saying that "(the beef agreement) is based on international science, that there is no scientific justification to postpone implementation, so we hope the Korean government will implement the agreement as soon as possible."

He said further he hoped that ``Koreans will begin to learn more about the science and about the facts of American beef and that this issue can be addressed constructively."

However, some observers believe that the media and opposition parties mistranslated or misconstrued the comments as they sparked immediate controversy.

The remarks angered main opposition United Democratic Party (UDP) leader Sohn Hak-kyu, who previously received a telephone call from Vershbow without prior notice and was told he was demanding too much of President Lee Myung-bak.

Sohn received the phone call after the UDP declared it would not cooperate in passing a free trade agreement with the United States.

As for the comment that ``Koreans will begin to learn more about the science," Sohn said the ambassador humiliated the Korean people with the remark. The UDP leader said President Lee was responsible for what he called Vershbow's ``arrogant and rude attitude" as Lee gave away too many concessions in the beef deal.

Regarding the responses Vershbow was quoted by GNP spokeswoman Cho as saying that his remarks shouldn't be construed to indicate that he did not respect the Korean people and their culture.

According to the spokeswoman, the ambassador promised to arrange meetings with American leaders for a delegation composed of five or six legislators and experts from think tanks.

GNP leader Kang said the delegation plans to visit the United States Monday to meet Congressional leaders as well as cattle raisers in an attempt to address rising public concerns over the safety of U.S. beef here.