

Korea Gives Up Renegotiating Deal

By Kim Yon-se, Na Jeong-ju, Staff Reporters
The Korea Times
June 5, 2008

A senior government official indicated Thursday that the government would not ask the United States to renegotiate the import deal.

Reworking the April accord would violate rules of the World Trade Organization on global trade and hurt the country's international credibility, he told reporters.

“We must abide by WTO's trade regulations in deciding whether to import U.S. beef. Renegotiation is not in line with globally accepted norms on trade agreements between countries,” the official said on condition of anonymity.

Sources, meanwhile, said the two sides are trying to calm public outrage by calling on U.S. cattle growers to distinguish through labeling meat from over 30-month cattle and under 30-month cattle.

Another contemplated measure is meat processors' voluntarily refraining from exporting beef aged over 30 months for a certain period, a move that is adding to people's anxiety, according to the sources.

Opposition parties and the majority of the people, however, want the renegotiation.

An opposition coalition boycotted the opening of the new National Assembly until the government renegotiates the beef deal with the U.S. Thousands of citizens have staged candlelit vigils since early May to protest the decision to import U.S. beef without appropriate safety measures.

Commerce law experts cite the minutes on the U.S. beef accord as the key factor hampering renegotiations.

Some pointed out previous trade renegotiations between Korea and the U.S. for eight sectors, such as labor and environment, from May to June 2007, after they concluded the free trade agreement (FTA) talks in early April that year.

But the point is that the FTA renegotiation was held “before the accord was signed” in late June 2007 though the FTA talks were sealed in April, a professor of Pusan National University said.

“In contrast, the minutes on U.S. beef deal were signed between agriculture representatives — Deputy Minister Min Dong-seok and Deputy Under Secretary A. Ellen Terpstra — right after the deal was sealed,” he said.

Under the situation, Seoul officials have already been aware that a revision of the minutes, under which American beef will be shipped to Korea irrespective of cattle age and bone-containing, is almost impossible.

Koreans' anxiety starts from the past records in the U.S. that slaughterhouses have been incapable or negligent in providing meat processing plants with exact ages of slaughtered cattle.

“In approximately 100 of 460 violations (or 22 percent) between 2004 and 2005, the inspected plants do not have documentation from suppliers that beef they are processing came from cattle under 30 months or that specified risk materials (SRMs) were removed,” U.S. civic group Public Citizen said citing data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Another concern is that Korea cannot distinguish beef from younger and older cattle if the exporters label falsely.

Furthermore, the voluntary refraining has no legal binding power to suspend imports even if U.S. exporters and Korean importers trade over 30-month beef.

Professor Lee Hae-young of Hanshin University's International Relations Department said, “The government is adopting a tricky solution only to placate angry protestors. After a certain period of voluntary restraint, the U.S. will export beef irrespective of cattle age.”

Large discount chains may sell only beef from younger cattle, a civic group official said. “But the meat from older cattle will be distributed to restaurants, fast food chains and others.”