

S. Korean Cabinet Offers to Quit After Beef Protests

The New York Times
The New York Times on the Web
By CHOE SANG-HUN
June 10, 2008

SEOUL, South Korea - South Korea's entire cabinet offered to resign on Tuesday as President Lee Myung-bak struggled to find a breakthrough in the biggest political crisis to face his young government, one set off by fears that an agreement to reopen markets to American beef could expose the public to mad cow disease.

Prime Minister Han Seung-soo and other cabinet members submitted their resignations to Mr. Lee hours before tens of thousands of South Koreans were scheduled to rally in downtown Seoul in what organizers said would be the largest demonstration to be held against the president and his 107-day-old government.

For the past 40 days, downtown Seoul has been rocked daily by demonstrations. What had started as a rally by hundreds of teenage students holding candles to protest the importing of American beef has evolved into a broad demonstration against government policies, with students, homemakers and workers chanting "Out with Lee Myung-bak!" On Tuesday Cho Hang-nam, a spokesman for Mr. Han, said, "The prime minister offered the resignations on behalf of cabinet members when he met President Lee this morning." Comment from Mr. Lee's office was not immediately available.

On Monday Mr. Lee sent a delegation to Washington to help diffuse the crisis and seek assurances that the United States would not export beef from cattle older than 30 months, even though that is allowed under an agreement reached with the United States in April. Younger cattle are believed to be less susceptible to mad cow disease.

The offer of resignations from Mr. Lee's cabinet, coupled with an earlier offer by his top aides to resign, opens the way for him to overhaul his government for a new beginning as he desperately tries to arrest his plummeting approval ratings.

Mr. Lee won the presidency in December with the biggest margin of victory in decades. But his popularity has plunged below 20 percent since his government agreed to open the domestic markets to beef from the United States despite deep-rooted public fear that American beef may not be safe from mad cow disease.

The agreement came as Mr. Lee championed a new "pragmatic" approach to relations with the United States. The alliance between Washington and Seoul had shown signs of strain under Mr. Lee's predecessor, Roh Moo-hyun, who was often accused of stoking and capitalizing on young South Koreans' nationalistic and often anti-American sentiments.

Mr. Lee hoped his decision to end the five-year-old ban on American beef would help win United States Congressional support for a free trade agreement between the countries. Congressional leaders have warned that they will never ratify the pact unless South Korea fully opens its market to American beef.

Thousands of South Korean students immediately took to the streets, followed by a broader uproar. The protesters called the agreement a "humiliating" concession that they said came under American pressure and in disregard of Koreans' health concern. As Mr. Lee, nicknamed "the bulldozer," refused to accept the snowballing demands for renegotiation, demonstrations grew. They became the platform for a wide range of grievances against the conservative leader's policies, particularly from left-leaning groups and labor unions.

Mr. Lee's blunders in appointing people with doubtful ethical standards to his presidential staff only compounded his trouble. He himself was dogged by allegations of corruption during the election campaign, but voters largely overlooked the claims, betting instead that Mr. Lee, a famed business chief executive, would be able to revive the economy. But his current trouble shows that South Koreans' patience was wearing thin. It remains unclear how many cabinet members he will replace.

Meanwhile, the police went on their highest alert on Tuesday, establishing barricades with buses and shipping containers across roads leading to the presidential Blue House.