

US and SKorea hold additional beef talks

Agence France-Presse

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SEOUL — The United States and South Korea are holding additional talks on US beef imports to help ease fears about mad cow disease here, officials said Monday.

Foreign Minister Yu Myung-Hwan said the outcome of additional talks between Seoul and Washington would be released soon.

"We are in the last stage of negotiations with Washington," he told reporters.

The two sides signed the beef deal last month. But street protests fueled by fears of mad cow disease prompted Seoul to delay resumption of beef imports, which have been effectively banned since last October.

Yonhap news agency said Washington agreed to include an additional provision recognising Seoul's right to conduct inspections and suspend imports if mad cow disease is confirmed in US cattle.

Under its earlier agreement with Washington, Seoul cannot stop beef imports until the World Organisation for Animal Health revises its position that US beef is safe.

Seoul and Washington say US beef is totally safe. But opponents say the meat carries a risk of the human form of mad cow disease.

Opening the beef market is an essential US precondition for approval of a separate US-South Korean free trade agreement (FTA).

The FTA, billed as the most significant pact between the two countries in half a century, was signed last June but legislators in both countries must ratify it.

Yu called for quick ratification of the trade back in parliament saying the two issues must be handled separately.

Opposition parties have said they will not ratify the FTA unless the Seoul government agrees to renegotiate the beef deal.