

S.Korea delays controversial US beef imports

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SEOUL — South Korea on Monday put off the implementation of its decision to resume US beef imports, bowing to protests that have seen thousands take to the streets over fears of mad cow disease.

The agriculture ministry said that it had asked for administrative procedures "on the implementation of new hygienic conditions" for US beef imports to be delayed.

South Korea lifted a ban on US beef imports last week despite growing protests over fears of mad cow disease as it struggles to ratify a sweeping free trade deal with the US, the world's biggest economy.

Procedural steps to lift the ban were supposed to be completed on Tuesday when the ministry of administration unveils its new rules.

"It is not clear right now whether the delay is indefinite or not," a ministry spokesman told AFP, adding there would be more talks among cabinet members on this issue.

Thousands of protesters have staged candle-lit demonstrations demanding the ban remains in place. They claim the government has not secured safeguards against the alleged dangers posed by the human form of mad cow disease.

Protests intensified last week after the government unveiled new rules on imports and for the inspection of US beef.

Shield-carrying riot police set off hand-held fire extinguishers early Monday to disperse thousands of protesters for the second night running after similar scenes late on Saturday and Sunday morning.

The delay on resuming US beef imports followed a request from the ruling Grand National Party (GNP), the agriculture ministry said.

GNP lawmakers earlier held an urgent meeting urging the government to delay the resumption. Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-Chun reportedly hinted Monday that he would resign.

President Lee Myung-Bak earlier promised a cabinet shakeup to allay public anger as his popularity has plummeted amid the beef deal.

Lee, a conservative leader who took office in February, said he would come up with "administrative shake-up measures," at talks with GNP chairman Kang Jae-Sup, his spokesman said.

A poll released by the country's largest newspaper, Chosun Ilbo, on Monday put Lee's approval rating at 21.2 percent compared to 52 percent in early March.

His approval rating was 19.7 percent in a survey published by the JoongAng newspaper. Polls by four other newspapers all showed his approval ratings in the 22 percent range.

Pollsters attributed Lee's diving popularity to fears of mad cow disease and rising consumer prices.

Seoul agreed in April to lift its intermittent ban on US beef imports, which was first imposed in December 2003 over mad cow disease.

Police have detained 545 protesters since May 24. Many have been released but about 300 people are still under interrogation.

Protest organisers claim more than 100 people have been injured. Police said 100 officers have been hurt.

The resumption of US beef imports was a pre-condition for Washington's approval of a free trade agreement with South Korea, which some analysts say could boost annual trade between the two nations by 20 billion dollars.

Lee's government sees the agreement signed last year as crucial to making South Korea more competitive over the long-term.

But South Korea's parliament had failed to ratify the free trade deal due to an opposition boycott.

A new parliamentary session begins this week but legislators have to repeat procedures to ratify the deal.