

SKorea to stick to US beef deal despite wave of criticism

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SEOUL -- South Korea's government insisted Wednesday it would not backtrack on an agreement to open its market to US beef, despite an Internet-driven tide of public criticism.

But President Lee Myung-Bak vowed to stop the imports if public health is threatened, amid growing concerns about the dangers of mad cow disease.

Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-Chun also told a hearing in parliament that the government would immediately suspend imports if a mad cow case is reported again in the United States.

"The government will immediately suspend imports if there is a new outbreak of mad cow disease in the United States. We will take action at the risk of trade friction," Chung said.

"I think this is the only way to relieve people's anxieties," he said.

Under an agreement with Washington, Seoul cannot stop imports until the World Organisation for Animal Health revises its position on US beef.

Opening up the beef market is a key precondition for US legislative approval of a wider free trade agreement (FTA) signed last year.

Seoul wants its own parliament to approve the FTA this month to persuade the US Congress also to move quickly.

Seoul and Washington say US beef is totally safe. But thousands of people, many of whom are apparently responding to Internet scare campaigns, have staged candlelit protests against the imports.

Lee said in the southern city of Jeonju that the government is always determined to protect public health.

"The government will immediately stop beef imports and work out relevant steps should the opening of our beef market pose any threat to the health of our people," he said.

"I know many people are very concerned about the opening of our beef market. Nothing is more important than the lives of the people... I'll actively work to dispel any public concerns."

South Korea agreed last month to lift the ban, on the eve of a Washington summit between Lee and George W. Bush.

Opponents say Seoul has not secured enough safeguards against the dangers of mad cow disease. They urge the government to scrap or renegotiate the deal.

Agriculture minister Chung said the beef deal was based on "scientific data," rejecting claims by opposition lawmakers that the government held hasty negotiations without taking proper precautions against mad cow disease.

US beef has also met international safety standards, Chung said, adding the number of mad cow cases worldwide had dramatically declined.

The agriculture ministry plans to send inspectors to check sanitary standards at 31 US slaughterhouses. But it said it would resume inspections of shipments this month, so they can be cleared for sale.

US Trade Representative Susan Schwab told a Washington think tank Tuesday that US beef is "perfectly safe" and criticised some South Korean media coverage as inflammatory and misleading.

Internet campaigns fuelled fears of mad cow disease following a popular TV programme which claimed that Seoul agreed to import US beef without sufficient safeguards.

Police are tracking down rumour-mongers who use the Internet and text messages.

Liberal groups have turned their protests into an anti-government campaign.

A web petition launched last month to call for the impeachment of Lee found a swell of support over the past week, with more than one million Internet users adding their signatures. It has no legal effect.

Lee's online mini-homepage was paralysed under onslaughts from users who bombarded it with messages protesting against the beef deal.