

South Korean president, opposition leader fail to reach agreement on free trade deal with US

Associated Press
May 20, 2008

SEOUL, South Korea: South Korea's president and the leader of the largest opposition party failed to reach a breakthrough Tuesday on ratifying the country's free trade deal with the United States before the current parliament's term ends next week.

South Korea and the U.S. agreed to the landmark accord last year to slash tariffs and other barriers to trade, but the deal must be endorsed by legislatures in both countries before it goes into effect.

On Tuesday, President Lee Myung-bak met Sohn Hak-kyu, leader of the liberal opposition United Democratic Party, and asked him to help pass the trade pact before the National Assembly's four-year term ends on May 29, according to presidential spokesman Lee Dong-kwan.

Sohn responded that he supports the deal but that it is difficult to push for ratification now because of mounting public criticism of Lee's decision to resume American beef imports, the spokesman said.

South Korea agreed last month to lift almost all quarantine restrictions on U.S. beef imports, which were effectively banned since a case of mad cow disease was discovered in the U.S. in late 2003. Thousands of South Koreans, worried about the safety of American beef, staged candlelight vigils in recent weeks to criticize Lee for making what they say was a concession to push the U.S. Congress to approve the free trade deal.

Cha Young, a spokeswoman for the opposition party, confirmed that the political meeting did not produce any agreement on the trade deal.

A new South Korean parliament is to be inaugurated on May 30.

Chances for parliamentary approval for the trade deal appear higher in the new 299-member legislature, as Lee's conservative Grand National Party won 153 seats in last month's elections, compared with the UDP's 81 seats.

The GNP has 111 seats and the UDP 136 seats in the outgoing parliament.

The free trade deal is the largest for the U.S. since the North American Free Trade Agreement more than a decade ago. It is the largest ever for South Korea.

Both sides said the accord will boost growth, but certain constituencies, such as farmers in South Korea and labor groups in the U.S., have opposed it out of concern it would threaten their livelihoods.