

Thousands rally in South Korean capital against free trade with US

By Associated Press
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SEOUL, South Korea - Thousands of South Korean workers demonstrated Saturday against a proposed free-trade agreement between their country and the United States.

Police estimated as many as 30,000 people gathered in front of Seoul city hall, chanting slogans against the accord.

The protest was peaceful and took place amid minimal police presence. On Wednesday, an estimated 65,000 workers participated in rallies and strikes nationwide.

At one, in the southwestern city of Gwangju, farmers clashed with police, though there were no injuries.

The government has vowed "zero tolerance" of violent protests, threatening to take all measures available including criminal punishment and claims for compensation.

Negotiators from the two sides plan to meet in Montana for five days starting Dec. 4 for their fifth round of talks.

Seoul and Washington began the discussions in June and have since made some headway but are unlikely to wrap up an agreement by the end of this year as originally hoped.

An agreement would slash tariffs and other barriers on a wide range of goods and services from the two nations, which already do \$72 billion worth of business a year. If successful, a pact would be the biggest for Washington since the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993.

The agreement has drawn fierce resistance from South Korean labor, agriculture and social groups, as well as the film industry. Farmers have been among the most vocal in protesting against any reduction in protections for agriculture, particularly rice.