

Hong Kong Police Arrest South Korean WTO Activists

Bloomberg, December 18, 2005

Hong Kong riot police began arresting about 900 South Korean anti-World Trade Organization activists after using tear gas to quell the most violent protests since the city returned to Chinese rule.

Korean farmers and unionists were marched 15 at a time through a cordon of riot police onto buses, ending a 12-hour protest that spurred the biggest ever mobilization of security forces on the island. Police announced by loudspeaker at 3 a.m. local time that all activists staging a sit-down protest on the city's main east-west thoroughfare would be taken into custody.

About 2,000 riot police earlier surrounded activists 250 meters from a conference center where 149 WTO ministers were negotiating global trade accords. Forty-one people, including five police, were injured in running battles in the Wan Chai shopping and entertainment district last night after police used batons and riot shields to repel activists armed with steel bars ripped from security fences.

“Please stay away from Wan Chai area,” Hong Kong Police Commissioner Dick Lee told a late-night press conference during the standoff. “Police will be taking all necessary action to restore order.”

The protest is the biggest test of Hong Kong's police, who outnumber demonstrators two-to-one, since the city reverted to Chinese control in 1997. Hong Kong hospitals earlier placed emergency staff on standby to deal with any injuries and South Korea's top diplomat urged police to show restraint.

South Korean activists, who have vowed to halt the WTO meeting, on Dec. 16 sprayed slogans on the wall of the U.S. Consulate and stormed a building housing their own diplomatic envoy. Police used pepper spray and batons to repel demonstrators on the first day of the trade talks involving the U.S., European Union and African, Asian and American nations.

“We oppose the U.S. demanding we open our rice market,” said Sun Aejin, a female activists supporting the South Korean farmers outside the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center. “Smash the WTO.”

Meeting

Delegates had to be ferried in by boat to the harbor side conference center after demonstrators broke through police lines to within a city block of the talks.

Inside the venue, negotiators, entering their final day of talks, criticized a proposal calling for speedier cuts in payments to U.S. cotton farmers and dates for ending European Union farm-export aid.

Yesterday's draft compromise by Director-General Pascal Lamy sets an end date for farm-export subsidies of either 2010 or five years after an agreement comes into force, now scheduled for 2008. The EU has resisted attaching a date. The draft also calls on the U.S. to begin slashing cotton subsidies earlier than other farm aid.

The 2010 date is "an absolute red line, as it falls squarely outside my mandate," EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson told negotiators, according to a copy of his speaking note. He didn't rule out the second option and said he could compromise provided he gets concessions from trade partners.

Violent

The demonstration yesterday brought together about 3,000 marchers protesting against everything from trade and agriculture policies to the environment and sexual exploitation.

The march turned violent when 1,000 Korean activists deviated from a prearranged route and attempted to reach the conference center, Hong Kong Police's Lee said.

Protesters used bamboo sticks to hit security forces and tried to overturn one of two police minibuses parked across a road in Wan Chai, he said.

Two blocks north, activists threw rocks and water bottles at security forces who used water canons and pepper spray to deter the attacks.

Jose Bove, a prominent French anti-globalization activist, scuffled with police officers barring the demonstrators' path.

Bove on Dec. 13 pledged not to cause trouble with police after WTO head Lamy personally appealed to security services to allow the activist into the city.

At Hong Kong's Ruttonjee Hospital, the closest medical facility to the WTO venue, spokeswoman Catherine Sum said accident and emergency staff were on stand-by and extra beds and other facilities are available if violence escalates.

South Korea's Consul General Cho Hwan Bok asked Hong Kong police to refrain from using excessive force and received a positive response from security services, Chun Pee Ho, director-general of trade policy at the foreign ministry said.

Complaints

South Korean farmers are angry after the country's parliament passed a law on Nov. 23 allowing more imports of rice, the nation's biggest cash crop, after a year's delay and protests by farmers and opposition lawmakers.

After violent protests on the opening day of the conference, when Hong Kong police donned riot gear for the first time in a decade, the South Korean activists changed tactics on Dec. 15 and staged peaceful demonstrations.

On Dec. 16, 50 Korean unionists sprayed ``No Bush!" and ``Down WTO" in red and black paint and pulled letters away from the front wall of the U.S. Consulate in the business district of the Chinese city. Female activists scuffled with police guarding the Korean mission after 50 demonstrators stormed the building.

Demonstrators held photographs of a South Korean peasant activist who committed suicide during the last WTO meeting in Cancun, Mexico in 2003.

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Last Updated: December 17, 2005 16:09 EST*