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South Korea's Beef with America

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(Originally published by Foreign Policy In Focus on June 13, 2008)

On June 10, one million South Koreans from all walks of life poured onto the streets of Seoul, the nation's capital, to protest the newly elected President Lee Myung Bak's deal with the United States to fully open Korean markets to U.S. beef.

Despite widespread concerns over the safety of U.S. beef imports, Lee acted quickly to lift the partial ban on U.S. beef to pave the way for the passage of the U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Lee knew that there would be no FTA unless Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-MT) got the green light for the U.S. beef industry to fully resume exports to South Korea, which banned U.S. beef in 2003 after the discovery of a cow with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

Protests began six weeks ago by high schools students and housewives concerned about the safety of U.S. beef appearing on their plates. It soon evolved into a massive campaign to bring down the Lee government. Anger against the deal quickly spread throughout the country, and within 40 days, the number of protesters grew from thousands to one million. "In the beginning it was about the beef," says 29-year-old Park Kyung Kun of Seoul, "but now it's about democracy. We want democracy back."

To the rest of the world, South Korean protests over the safety of U.S. beef are portrayed as an expression of simmering anti-Americanism. Without a doubt, anti-American sentiments have historical roots. But Koreans also have a legitimate claim to fear the safety of U.S. beef.

Beef Recall

Last year, some 200 million pounds of beef were recalled from the U.S. food supply. In just one recall, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recalled 143 million pounds of meat from just one company alone, the Westland/Hallmark Meat Company. Meat from this slaughtering house has been distributed throughout the National School Lunch programs. And despite the recall, very little was returned because most of it had already

been consumed. “Over the past few years, several hundred million pounds of U.S. beef have been recalled,” says Dr. Michael Greger of the Humane Society of the United States. “This is a staggering amount,” says Greger. “No wonder Koreans are concerned.”

The USDA tests approximately one out of every 1,000 cows. In real numbers, only 40,000 cows are tested of the 37 million cows slaughtered annually. Meanwhile, Japan surveys every cow, Europe one in four, and Canada one out of 250. The USDA devotes just two percent of its overall \$90 billion dollar budget and just two percent of its entire 100,000-person staff to “enhance protection and safety of the nation’s agriculture and food supply.” It’s no wonder why 65 countries, including the European Union, restrict U.S. beef imports.

Since 2003, three cattle from the United States have been infected with mad cow disease. Given the fatality of mad cow disease, Americans would assume that the USDA is pushing for more testing of the beef industry. To the contrary, Congress hasn’t even passed a ban on eating downed animals. These are animals that are too sick or injured to even walk and are literally being dragged into the slaughterhouse. Rather, the USDA is prosecuting companies who want to conduct their own testing. In 2007, the USDA prosecuted Creekstone Farms for wanting to test with their own money every one of their own cattle for mad cow disease. They won the right to test in Federal Court, but in May 2008, the Bush administration reversed the court decision allowing the meatpacking company to market its products as BSE-free.

Open Door Policy

Another reason why South Koreans are so roiled is because the beef protocol will allow in nearly all forms of American beef into the Korean market and will weaken the controls the Korean government has traditionally used in case of suspected problems. The April 18, 2008 deal scraps the important qualification Lee’s predecessor Roh Moo Hyun included in the side deal it negotiated last year ensuring that imported beef must be free of “specified risk material” for BSE, such as bone fragments.

South Korean Trade Minister Kim Jong-Hoon is now in Washington to renegotiate yet another voluntary regulation system. According to this protocol, U.S. beef companies would self-label the age of the cattle where the beef came from. But South Koreans have already seen how ineffective this voluntary system works. Last year, when South Korea partially lifted its ban to allow boneless beef and beef from cattle under aged 30 months, the first three shipments of U.S. beef to Korea contained bone fragments, including one shipment that contained an entire spine.

The voluntary system still doesn’t address the “Specified Risk Materials” (SRMs) that are highly susceptible to BSE. Most Koreans eat 85 parts of the cow, compared with Americans who eat only about 10 parts. And Koreans eat parts of the cow that are highly susceptible to prions that huddle in certain areas of the brain, eyes, intestines, spinal cords and backbones—this is anatomical and scientific, not hysterical. By the time these prions invade our immune systems, humans are exposed to a fatal, neurodegenerative disease

with no cure: Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. It riddles our brain with holes. And this isn't something that one can just cook out of the meat, compared to most other food-borne pathogens. So it's up to the meat industry to make it safe and the USDA to ensure that it doesn't end up in our food supply and on our plates.

In the end, it is up to Koreans to determine their own food safety standards. These are government regulations and policies, and therefore must be democratically decided. They should not be imposed by another country, especially one that has such a questionable track record.

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