

US beef arrives in South Korea amid protests, lawsuits, and crackdowns

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On July 29, 1.47 tons of US bone-in beef arrived in South Korea from New York for the first time since shipments were banned in December 2003, after the first case of mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) was reported in Washington state.

The South Korean National Veterinary Research and Quarantine Service will inspect the beef for 18 days. Boneless US beef imports were resumed in April 2007, but suspended when a backbone was found during inspection. Some 1,300 tons of US beef—out of the 5,300 tons that has been in cold storage in South Korea since October—have already passed inspection. New beef sanitary rules took effect in June allowing for import of bones and organs from cattle under 30 months of age, younger cattle being less prone to mad cow disease.

The new shipment came amid lingering anti-US beef protests by civic and labor groups. These protests began in May with student demonstrations and peaked in June with at least 100,000 people taking to the streets of Seoul and over one million demonstrating nationwide. Coinciding with the arrival of US bone-in beef, the Korea Health and Medical Workers' Union in Daegu city announced a limited strike of nurses and therapists at 103 hospitals across the country. Union demands included wage increases, hiring more personnel, banning US beef in hospital meals, and prohibiting privatization of the medical sector. A few days earlier, on the evening of Saturday 26 through the morning of Sunday 27, 1,500 demonstrators occupied central Seoul.

At the beginning of the month, the Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union also hung banners in public schools with slogans saying "We oppose serving US beef, which is at risk of mad cow disease, in school cafeterias" and "We demand the complete reversal of the Lee Myung-bak government's education policy." Such is the climate into which the US beef imports have arrived.

President Lee Myung-bak, who has been in power since February and has a dismal 17 percent approval rating, has sought to curb social protest with repression and arrests. Acting on a June civil and criminal charge filed by the Agriculture Ministry, citing alleged defamation of its minister, Chung Woon-chun, and its negotiators, the Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office said on July 29 that the Munhwa Broadcasting Company (MBC) triggered unsubstantiated rumors and mass protests by intentionally broadcasting distorted claims and mistranslations about mad cow disease and the risks of US beef in the April 29 and May 13 episodes of "PD Note" titled "Urgent Report! Is US Beef Safe from Mad Cow Disease?"

The current affairs television program aired images of a US downer cow (a cow that cannot walk) and stated that it had mad cow disease; mistakenly reported that a Virginia woman, Aretha Vinson, died after contracting variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), the human equivalent of mad cow disease, when she succumbed to the similarly named but unrelated Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD); said Koreans are genetically more susceptible to vCJD; and claimed that mad cow disease can be contracted from ingredients in instant noodles, medicines, and

cosmetics.

MBC producers dismissed the prosecutor's allegation of intentional distortion. It said in a press release that the repeated investigations of a media report challenging the government is damaging to the people's right to know and to freedom of the press. Attempting to gain public support, lawmakers from the main opposition Democratic Party, whose popularity stands at 10 percent, held that summoning MBC producers before a special committee infringes on freedom of expression and journalism. The Seoul civil court ruled on July 31 that MBC must air two corrections and one refutation.

The government has also come down on the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). On July 24, the Seoul Central District Court issued arrest warrants for KCTU Chairman Lee Seok-heang, Vice Chairman Jin Young-ok, and Secretary-General Lee Yong-sik. The three were charged with leading a two-hour strike at Hyundai and Kia Motors on July 2, in which 88,000 workers at 114 plants participated, resulting in production losses of 200 billion won (\$188 million dollars); ordering union members to obstruct transport of US beef imports in cold storage from June 26 to July 5; and having members participate in "illegal" anti-US beef candlelight vigils organized by the People's Conference Against Mad Cow Disease, a coalition of 1,700 civic groups that is the main protest organizer. Under South Korean law, demonstrations and protests at night are illegal. Nine arrest warrants were issued against leaders of the KCTU.

Three days earlier, prosecutors indicted Hwang Sun-won, leader of the civic group Jinbo Core, for organizing 31 nighttime demonstrations from May 3 to June 24 after he joined the People's Conference Against Mad Cow Disease. The headquarters of that organization and the Korea Alliance for Progressive Movement were raided on June 30. Police confiscated computers, documents, and other properties for evidence of planning supposedly illegal demonstrations.

Represented by the conservative legal group Lawyers for Citizens, 115 business owners near Seoul City Hall Plaza, where protests have been concentrated, filed a class action lawsuit in mid-July against the government and eleven protest organizers, including the People's Conference Against Mad Cow Disease. Merchants are seeking 1.725 billion won (\$1.7 million) in compensation for losses that resulted from the months-long protests. On July 31, the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency filed a suit against protest organizers and leaders, claiming 330 million won (\$324,755) for damages. Proof is being gathered for an additional 790 million won (\$777,444).

The US beef import crisis and protests arose under conditions of soaring commodity prices, economic slowdown, and rising unemployment in South Korea in tandem with surging oil prices and the slowing global economy. Negotiations for the resumption of US beef imports did not, however, begin with the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration. The *JoongAng Ilbo* reported on July 28 that the former liberal Roh Moo-hyun administration made an agreement with the US in November 2007, a

month after the October suspension of US beef imports, that it would resume importation in three phases:

“Under the plan, [South] Korea would only import beef from cows under 30 months old in the first phase; it would lift the ban on boneless beef from cows over 30 months in the second phase after the U.S. toughened feed standards. In the third phase it would follow the World Organization for Animal Health recommendations to import beef of all ages, including beef with bones when the U.S. actually implements the feed standards.”

Desperate to finalize the deal before the Bush administration finishes its term in office, Lee hastily accepted an April 18 deal with Washington, whose condition is that beef exports are a prerequisite for ratification of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that will benefit the South Korean auto sector in the US market. Seoul fears that a Democratic Party victory in the November 2008 US presidential election could quash the FTA.

Lee’s move also served to create a cordial climate for the April 19 summit at Camp David, where he met President George W. Bush. On April 25, the ban on older cattle was lifted after the US announced that it had adopted new feed rules. In his haste to strike a deal with Washington, Lee was perceived by the South Korean public as disregarding social health concerns and submitting to US political pressure.

MBC aired the “PD Note” episode on April 29, questioning the safety of US beef. Meanwhile, teenage girls reportedly began discussing the health risks of mad cow disease on fan web sites for television personalities. Soon thereafter, the Agora online forum at the *Daum* web portal became the online center for discussion, protest, and rumors among youth. A high school student began a campaign for Lee’s impeachment that gathered 1.3 million signatures in one week. Organizing through Agora and text messages, thousands of students marched on central Seoul on May 2. They declared that they would be the victims of US beef in cafeteria meals, and they aired grievances about Lee’s education policies.

Student demonstrations were initially ignored by the establishment media, prompting amateur coverage and Internet video uploads by “citizen reporters.” After footage of a female protester being beaten by police was posted online, more people attended the demonstrations, then civic groups, labor unions, and opposition parties joined in. On July 29, the *Korea Times* reported a survey conducted by the Study Group on Internet Politics and the *Seoul Shinmun* on 800 middle and high school students who participated in the June 7 rally at Seoul Plaza, when the protests were reaching their crescendo. The survey found that the vast majority of youth attended voluntarily: 71 percent came out of their own concerns, 18 percent were invited by friends, 6 percent were recommended by parents, and only 1 percent went in response to the call by civic groups.

The May student protests turned into a mass political movement with daily demonstrations demanding renegotiation of the US beef deal, calling for Lee’s ouster, and denouncing rising fuel and food prices, education and health policies, privatization of public companies and financial institutions, the Grand Canal construction project from Seoul to Busan, the US military troop presence, and the hard-line North Korea policy that has inflamed inter-Korean tensions. On May 25 and June 5, respectively, worker and Democratic Labor Party member Lee Byeong-ryeol (42) and unemployed cattle farmer Kim Gyeong-cheol (56) set themselves on fire in protest against the Lee Myung-bak government. Lee Byeong-ryeol died from his injuries while Kim survived.

On June 10, some 100,000 people demonstrated in Seoul Plaza, the largest demonstration South Korea has witnessed since the June 10, 1987, pro-democracy uprising against the right-wing military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan. Editorials in the conservative press reflected the uneasiness of the ruling establishment over the growing social protests, as well as over the involvement of Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist groups, which came out in response to police brutality in late June. The following

statements appeared in *JoongAng Ilbo* editorials:

* June 28: “[T]he government has had to take stern measures against people who mock the law. [. . .] Law enforcement by prosecutors and the police depends a lot on the president’s will.”

* July 2: “[A]ll the slogans that the [Catholic] priests’ association shouted on Monday [30] were the same as those shouted by ordinary citizens. [. . .] Religious communities should not be holding candles in the street.”

* July 3: “The current division we are experiencing in [South] Korea that started with the beef issue is in some ways similar to the situation in the United States before the outbreak of the American Civil War.”

* July 5: “If anti-US beef protesters are really concerned about the health and rights of the public, they need to observe whether or not the order of our free market economy is being followed.”

* July 14: “The Grand National Party and the rightist intellectuals argue that the rallies are not much different from the Cultural Revolution that ruined China.”

Mass social intervention in politics was seen as a threat to capitalism. When heavy-handed police responses resulted in street battles between demonstrators and law enforcement, articles and editorials in the leading conservative dailies—*Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, and *JoongAng Ilbo*—began to denounce the protests as anarchy, chaos, lawless, leftist, a nightmare, militant, radical, sordid, violent, and a state of emergency. Law and order had to be sternly enforced and violence had to be firmly punished, the right-wing media argued.

Lee’s initial reaction to social fears over mad cow disease and outrage over the resumption of US beef imports was a public apology and reshuffling of his cabinet. He replaced 9 of his 10 senior presidential aides on June 20. While the Lee administration never intended to reimpose the 2003 ban on American beef, the Grand National Party government made a limited concession to the protests by negotiating with the US on June 21 that beef must come from cattle under 30 months old. The Korea Customs Service also announced on June 26 that people—dubbed *seo-parazzi* (beef paparazzi)—who reported the misrepresentation of the origin of beef would receive cash rewards. When Lee’s measures did not work, he asserted that he would clamp down on protests deemed illegal for running into the evening hours. A June 27 editorial in the liberal *Hankyoreh* sums up the GNP government reaction as follows:

“President Lee Myung-bak has begun his counterattack. While expected, it has come suddenly like a blitz. On June 19, he said he had ‘seen the candlelight and reproached’ himself. On June 24, he revealed his intention to deal sternly with the candlelight protests. On June 25, protest participants were rounded up and arrested. On June 28, the government formally published its announcement that American beef imports were beginning again.”

On the same day, more than 18,000 people assembled in central Seoul reiterating demands for renegotiation of the US beef deal. On June 30, the *International Herald Tribune* reported the president’s warning against mounting social tensions, as well as the threat that police would resort to liquid tear gas, which has not been used for a decade in South Korea. On Saturday, July 5, 50,000 people, according to the police estimate, gathered peacefully in front of Seoul City Hall in what was the largest demonstration since June 10. Protest organizers put the figure at 500,000. The end of June through July witnessed protracted raids, confiscations, roundups, and arrests of leaders, organizers, and participants in the ongoing anti-US beef demonstrations.

With the GNP government shaken by three months of protests, the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency formed a special police force on July 30, designed to deal exclusively with “violent” and “illegal” demonstrators. Civic organizations such as the People’s Conference Against Mad Cow Disease have denounced the special police force as a return of the notorious Baekgoldan (white skull corps) that the brutal military dictator

General Chun Doo-hwan mobilized in the 1980s to smash social dissent against his authoritarian regime.



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