

Premier in U-turn on beef delegation

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The government yesterday called off a plan to send a delegation made up of members of the Executive Yuan to Washington to contain the fallout from the legislature's move to bar imports of certain US beef products.

Instead, a delegation mainly made up of lawmakers and representatives from non-governmental organizations would head to the US on a fact-finding trip, Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登毅) said at a press conference yesterday.

It was an about-face after the Presidential Office on Wednesday relayed a message from President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) instructing officials from the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Department of Health and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to form a delegation to go to the US "no later than next week" to explain Taiwan's stance on the beef issue to the US government.

Ma also wanted the government to arrange a trip to the US for lawmakers and representatives from civil and consumer groups who have concerns over the safety of US beef products to gain a better understanding of the beef industry.

The instructions followed a high-level meeting convened by Ma on fence-mending efforts after the legislature declined on Tuesday to endorse the protocol that Taiwan signed with the US in October that lifted the previous ban on US bone-in beef and various other beef products.

Instead, lawmakers from both the governing and opposition parties reached a consensus to vote through an amendment to the Act Governing Food Sanitation (食品安全法) on Tuesday that will ban imports of "risky" beef products from areas where cases of mad cow disease have been recorded in the previous decade.

The legislative move has drawn a rebuke from Washington, which expressed dismay, believing the proposed amendment contravenes the protocol.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Timothy Yang (楊慶堃) yesterday denied the government had canceled the executive branch's trip to the US because the US had closed the door on negotiations with Taiwan following its statement issued on Wednesday that warned against the legislature's plan to statutorily ban certain US beef products.

"There is no emergency" to send government officials to the US as the country's representative in the US, Jason Yuan (袁國強), talked to the US executive branch on Wednesday and it went "smoothly," Yang told reporters at the same press conference Wu attended.

The US Trade Representative Office and its related administrative departments had understood the efforts the Ma government undertook on the matter, Taiwanese public opinion and the legislature's concerns on the issue, Yang said.

"If there is any need in the future, we will send officials at the appropriate level to

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communicate with the US,” Wu said.

Regarding the government’s response to the US’ dissatisfaction with Taiwan, Yang said the government would urge the US to “accept the result agreed by lawmakers across party lines,” “not to overreact” and “not to let other non-trade or economic issues get involved.”

The government would also urge the US to express its goodwill toward Taiwan on issues such as the resumption of Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) talks, arms sales, exchanges between high-level officials of the two countries and its visa-waiver program to ensure the beef issue did not have a negative impact on Taiwan-US relations, Yang said.

Yang said MOFA had met with Eric Madison, deputy director of the Taipei Office of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), and had conveyed the government’s position that both sides should “talk rationally” to avoid a “lose-lose situation.”

The US should work with the government to lessen the impact on bilateral relationships, Yang said.

In MOFA’s written briefing to the Executive Yuan yesterday, Yang said responsibility to persuade the public to accept the government’s relaxation of restrictions on US beef products “did not fully fall on our side,” adding that the “AIT lacked efficient measures to promote [US beef products],” which made it more difficult for the government to implement the protocol it signed.

Yang said the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the US would tell the US Department of State “in a roundabout way” that it should “improve its communication skills” when talking to the public and the legislature and should “not unilaterally place pressure on our side.”

Wu said he appreciated that the efforts made by the legislature to prohibit some US beef products were to “safeguard the public’s health” and “alleviate the public’s concerns.”

Because the US and Taiwan are both democratic countries, Wu said the US would understand that the legislature is the institution that has the final say on policy because it represents the people.

“That is the universal rule in a democracy. Things like this are not unusual. What an executive branch agrees to [with other countries in negotiations] is not always approved by its congress,” Wu said.

Wu yesterday did not reveal details on who would join the group heading to the US, when it would depart and who it would visit, saying that the government needed more time to make the arrangements.

But legislators across party lines gave a cold shoulder to a possible invitation to join the group.

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Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) caucus secretary-general Lu Hsueh-chang (盧秀昌) said Taiwan was not a US colony, adding that even if legislators were to participate in the delegation, the responsibility of legislators is to inspect the safety of US beef and not to explain the legislature's proposed amendment to US officials.

"The Legislative Yuan should not belittle itself," Lu said.

Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平) said he had not received an invitation to join the group, adding that no legislators could join a delegation representing the legislature without a resolution being passed.

Wang said Washington should be aware that the amendment only affects about 2 percent of Taiwan's total US beef imports.

Meanwhile, National Security Council (NSC) Deputy Secretary-General Lee Hai-tung (李海堂) said the high-level meeting convened a day earlier by Ma was sufficient to address Washington's discontent over the amendment and there was no need for Taiwan to convene a national security meeting.

Lee was responding to a question from KMT Legislator Lu Shiow-yen (盧秀燕) during a meeting on the beef issue at the legislature. Lu described the issue as "a diplomatic crisis between Taiwan and the United States."

At a separate setting yesterday, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) said allowing US beef to have full and comprehensive access to Taiwan's market was a "monumental diplomatic mistake" by Ma and the Ma administration must apologize to the public for ruining Taiwan-US relations.

DPP Spokesperson Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭美琴) said agreeing to lift the ban on US bone-in beef was the "most serious mistake" since dictator Chiang Kai-shek's (蔣介石) decision to withdraw from the UN in 1971.

More specifically, Hsiao blamed NSC Secretary-General Su Chi (蘇起), who is accused by the DPP and some pan-blue lawmakers of forging a deal with the US over the beef issue without first obtaining the consent of the public.

"If the beef issue ends up hurting Taiwan-US relations, Su must be held fully accountable. The blame should not be shouldered by the Legislative Yuan or the Taiwanese people," Hsiao said.

She pointed out that in the past, the US has had disagreements with other countries, such as Japan, South Korea and Europe, over disputes on agricultural imports, but at no time had the conflict been so great as to affect military cooperation.

"It is quite despicable of the Ma government to keep threatening the public, saying if we ban

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US beef imports, the US would refuse to sell weapons to Taiwan,” Hsiao said.

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