

Legislature bans some US beef

Written by Taipei Times

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President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) yesterday said he would honor the legislature's decision to amend a food safety law even though it would contravene a bilateral beef trade protocol signed by Taiwan and the US in October. The president, however, was evasive about who should be held responsible for the about-face.

"The top priority at the moment is to find out how the US government will react to the legislature's decision and minimize the damage," Ma said at a press conference at the Presidential Office yesterday afternoon after the legislature in the morning passed an amendment to the Act Governing Food Sanitation (食品安全法), banning imports of specific beef products from countries with documented cases of mad cow disease in the past decade.

The legislation will bar US ground beef, beef offal and other beef parts such as skulls, eyes and intestines from entering the Taiwanese market.

Lawmakers yesterday also passed three supplementary resolutions proposed by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) caucus. One obliges the government to abide by the results of a proposed referendum on beef imports, while the other states that lawmakers across party lines and the government should stand up to pressure from other countries resulting from the amendment. The other resolution stipulates that the government should strictly prohibit imports of products from cows over 30 months of age.

The KMT-dominated legislature, however, axed a resolution proposed by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) caucus suggesting a ban on the imports of bone-in beef until a referendum on the issue is held.

After the bill cleared the legislative floor yesterday, DPP Legislator Kuan Bi-ling (關基玲) said the passage was not a victory for the DPP, but "a victory for all Taiwanese."

DPP Legislator William Lai (賴英偉) called on Ma to apologize for the government's "mistake" in lifting a partial ban on US beef products last year.

"We will never allow an incompetent president to hide behind the legislature, which cleaned up the mess created [by the government]," Lai said. "[National Security Council Secretary-General] Su Chi (蘇起), who is the mastermind behind all this, should resign."

KMT Legislator Daniel Hwang (黃珊珊), one of the legislators who proposed the bill, said the passage meant "legislators across party lines have an obligation to reflect public opinion" even though the government has the authority to negotiate trade regulations with other countries.

KMT caucus secretary-general Lu Hsueh-chang (盧秀燕) said the legislature had created an opportunity for the government to relaunch renegotiations with the US because the legislature had resolved the controversy in a democratic manner.

Lai called on the US to respect the decision.

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“Taiwan is a democracy. Even though US beef imports are an important issue for the US, [Washington] should not force Taiwan to forsake its interests for those of the US,” he said. “We hope the two countries will be brothers forever.”

The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) yesterday expressed regret over the decision, adding that the decision would hurt the Taiwan-US economic relationship.

“The US deeply regrets the Legislative Yuan’s decision to restrict US beef imports. The legislature’s decision to abrogate the bilateral protocol we negotiated in good faith disregards both science-based standards as well as findings of Taiwan’s own risk assessment,” AIT press officer Christopher Kavanagh told the Taipei Times by telephone, reading from a statement.

The AIT echoed a warning by the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) and the US Department of Agriculture last week, as well as Senate Finance Committee Chair Max Baucus of Montana on Monday, that the passage of the act “undermines Taiwan’s credibility as a responsible trading partner.”

Washington also reminded Taiwan of its past contributions to Taiwan’s economic development, such as US support for membership in the WTO and APEC.

“In light of this legacy and the continuing importance of our bilateral economic relationship, we urge Taiwan to honor its commitments and to implement the beef protocol as negotiated,” AIT said.

The USTR and the US Department of Agriculture will issue a joint statement on the matter, AIT said.

At a press conference presided over by Ma yesterday, the president evaded the DPP’s call for an apology and for Su to step down, saying the Cabinet would “handle the problems” caused by the decision.

Blaming the policy shift on poor government communication, Ma said the problem did not lie with political parties, the executive or legislative branches, but rather with a public that could not be convinced that US beef and beef products are safe.

“We should have communicated earlier, more and better,” he said.

Describing the controversy as a trade issue, Ma said it was bound to affect Taiwan-US relations and the country’s reputation.

He said he hoped such impact would be restricted to trade, adding that he had not seen signs that it would spill over into other areas — particularly political and military affairs.

Ma said he did not know the extent of the damage, if any, caused to trade relations with the US, but added it was most likely to affect consultations on the Trade and Investment

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Framework Agreement (TIFA) that Taipei hopes to sign with Washington.

Ma said the US has and always will be Taiwan's security ally and an important trading partner.

"The Republic of China is a responsible member of the international community and a reliable trading partner. We will do whatever we can to resolve the dispute and are sincere about mending ties [with the US]," he said. "However, what we do will never compromise public health."

Ma did not say whether negotiations with the US would be reopened, saying the government did not rule out "consulting with the US at an appropriate time."

The protocol signed with Washington states that both sides shall hold consultations within 180 days of the effective date of the protocol to review its implementation and that the consultations shall be held within seven working days of the request.

Before consultations are held, Ma said he expected the executive branch do its best to implement part of the import protocol deemed acceptable to display the country's sincerity in honoring the accord, which he said remains effective.

Among the articles deemed acceptable is the import of bone-in beef of cattle younger than 30 months, he said, adding that he hoped it would enter the market as soon as possible.

As Taipei and Beijing are set to negotiate an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) this month, Ma said his administration would do its best to make the process transparent and explain the proposed agreement to the public.

Communication would involve legislators and the public, Ma said, adding that the executive and legislative branches must standardize how they communicate and promote policies. No policy will take effect until a standard operating protocol is fully implemented, he said.

Ma said it was not his responsibility alone to communicate with the public and that since Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登益) and Vice Premier Eric Chu (吳敦義) had been legislators, they should know how to do so.

In response, the DPP said Ma was "irresponsible, unrepentant and unwilling to face reality," adding that the beef issue had highlighted what it called the Ma administration's inability to steer the nation at critical times.

DPP Spokesperson Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭百愷) said that during his press conference, Ma made a number of illogical statements and showed little contrition over his decision to give US beef full access to the Taiwanese market.

"[Ma] said the legislative amendment was a reflection of public opinion. If he holds that to be true, then why did he sign an agreement that betrays the public?" she asked.

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If Ma was so confident that opening the Taiwanese market to US beef imports would not pose a health threat, she said, then why did the government implement a string of health supervision measures after it signed the agreement with Washington?

The only hint of apology demonstrated by Ma, Hsiao said, was his acknowledgement of the government's poor communication with the legislature.

Ma's admission proves that the DPP was right in proposing a legislative committee on cross-strait affairs, she said, urging Ma to stop obstructing the creation of such a body because cross-strait affairs would have a far greater impact on people's lives than US beef.

Approached for comment at a separate setting yesterday, Wu said he hoped the US would "show empathy" toward the Ma government because "it has to comply with the legislature's decision ... in a democratic country ruled by law."

"[Taiwan] hurt its credibility a little, but fortunately, this time, as the US is a democratic country, it will understand the legislature has the power to approve or invalidate a protocol," Wu said.

"As friends, we are sorry," he said. "However, ensuring public health and addressing worries over food safety are things a government should do — and these are priorities of the government. We hope our American friends will understand that [Taiwan] imports not only US beef, but also soy beans and animal feed."

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs yesterday said the US response would be taken very seriously, adding that the overall Taiwan-US relationship would not unravel over the beef controversy.

Also yesterday, Minister of Economic Affairs Shih Yen-shiang (石硯祥) said that planned TIFA talks with the US were no longer expected to take place as scheduled.

Shih said that several planned bilateral pacts that would pave the way for the signing of a Taiwan-US free-trade agreement — a topic to be discussed at the TIFA talks — would likely be affected.

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