

Farmers rally against US-SKorea free-trade deal

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SEOUL, South Korea: Thousands of farmers rallied Tuesday against a pending free-trade deal with the United States, saying the accord threatens their livelihoods.

Some 6,000 police officers were deployed to the rally outside the National Assembly because past protests have erupted in violence, but there were no immediate reports of clashes.

Police said about 11,000 farmers took part in the protest. They were joined by a few members of the National Assembly, including the chairman of the Agriculture, Forestry, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Committee.

Farmers held pickets and banners saying "NO to FTA Ratification" and set a ceremonial bier labeled "Korea-U.S. FTA" on fire.

South Korean and U.S. officials agreed last year to slash tariffs and other barriers to trade in a landmark deal, but the agreement still needs to be ratified by lawmakers in both countries.

President-elect Barack Obama has strongly criticized the deal with South Korea, saying it does not adequately address an imbalance in the auto trade. South Korean officials say they will not renegotiate.

Ratification of the Free Trade Agreement would result in an agrarian uprising, warned Eui-gyu Park, chairman of the Korean Advanced Farmers Federation.

"It is nonsense to propose that Korea will become an advanced nation by selling cars, computers and mobile phones at the cost of killing agricultural industries," he added.

South Korea's ruling Grand National Party has enough votes to ratify the deal before the current parliamentary session ends in December. However, it is unlikely to do so due to the risk of public backlash.

The free-trade deal would be the largest for the U.S. since the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect more than a decade ago. But it faces opposition there too, with labor groups opposed to it.