

## Agriculture by Lydia Cherry

### Rice's 'special situation'

*Food self-sufficiency is the issue in Japanese and South Korean opposition to free trade "economic tyranny."*

On Nov. 19 in Tokyo, a statement was released opposing opening the Japanese and South Korean rice markets to imports. The statement was backed by 139 legislators of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and 117 parliamentarians of South Korea's Democratic Party and United People's Party. It reads, "In Japan and South Korea, rice has the important function to maintain food self-sufficiency."

The release was timed with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Seattle. The statement notes that a majority of farmers in the two nations maintain their livelihood by growing rice. Demanding the opening of the rice market without taking this into consideration is "economic tyranny on the part of the United States," the statement read.

The legislators said they will boycott the ratification of the Uruguay Round of the U.N. multilateral General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) talks if their governments make "a unilateral compromise" and accept the "tariffication" of rice. This refers to a maneuver by the U.N. Secretariat and Anglo-American free-trade bloc in which they are demanding that countries give up the right to bar imports and instead place tariffs on imports—which tariffs will, in turn, be subsequently eliminated.

On Dec. 1, an emergency meeting of cabinet ministers, chaired by South Korea's Economic Planning Board Minister Lee Kyuang-shick, announced that the South Koreans would send a team to the GATT talks in Geneva to try to persuade U.S. representatives not to press Seoul to open

its rice market. "We will have to do our utmost until the last minute, although everyone knows this is a lonely fight," an EPB official said. "It was decided we would actively negotiate to help conclude the Uruguay Round negotiations . . . but also persuade [other countries] that rice is a special situation," the EPB said in a statement released after the talks.

However, the South Korean press is already painting a picture of the aftermath of rice market openings, and farmers are now flocking to Seoul to hold street protests against the government for letting them down.

Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries Minister Ho Sin-haeng is quoted by Yonhap news service saying, "We will do our best to stand by our rice market till the very last moment, but if our sole ally, Japan, turns to an open policy, we have to take appropriate countermeasures."

GATT and Anglo-American cartel interests have responded by bullying Korea. GATT commissioners warned Korea that if they stick to their "no rice" policy after the conclusion of the global trade accord, Korea will be ostracized by the international community and find itself in a trade war with the advanced countries.

Tokyo is said to have decided that it will surrender its rice market, but it faces internal friction as members of the Socialist Party are threatening to leave the coalition government. Japan's NHK television reported Nov. 28 that the Socialists, the largest member of the ruling coalition, threatened to bring down the government if it caves in on the rice question.

Japanese government spokesman Masayoshi Takemura rationalized giving up its right to make food policy, in a Nov. 28 statement: "Japan depends on free trade and should not be responsible for ruining GATT. It would not be right if, after all sorts of difficult world problems had been solved, it was only Japan's rice problem that remained and only Japan that had refused to give way."

On Dec. 1, Japan's Food Agency (which coordinates food supplies centrally) announced the ways that rice wholesalers and retailers must blend and label foreign rice with domestic rice. Yoshiharu Sato, president of Japan's Central Union of Agricultural Cooperatives, criticized the Food Agency for this, saying, "If they're blended, the bad-tasting foreign rice will get all mixed up with the good-tasting Japanese rice. . . . Japanese farmers work hard to grow good rice."

The South Korean government reportedly has argued in Geneva that it cannot match the U.S.-Japan pact because conditions are far different from Japan, which has reportedly agreed to 4-8% Minimum Market Access and tariffication after six years.

In Korea, rice production is worth \$8.6 billion a year and accounts for 3.1% of the Gross National Product, while the share is just 0.6% in Japan. In Korea, rice farming provides 13.4% of total employment in Korea, and rice is the primary source of income for farmers.

Washington has demanded that South Korea, no matter how its situation differs from that of Japan, accept "tariffication" in exchange for lifting the ban on rice imports. According to some sources, U.S.-South Korea talks have focused on a "minimum access opening" under which Seoul would accept the import of a small amount of rice, increasing the amount slightly over six years.