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Effort to ease radiation fears in Asia may have limited effect

By MAYA KANEKO
 Kyodo

The nation's desperate efforts to ease widespread concerns over its products caused by the nuclear crisis in Fukushima Prefecture have borne some fruit, as important trade partners China and South Korea agreed to take a scientific-based approach for Japanese imports at a trilateral summit through Sunday.

In a show of support for Japan's reconstruction, the neighbors vowed to ensure the smooth flow of trade and boost the number of Japan-bound tourists in joint statements issued after the two-day meeting in Tokyo.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao also said in his bilateral talks with Prime Minister Naoto Kan on Sunday morning that Beijing will ease its import restrictions on Japanese food and farm produce provided the safety of Chinese nationals is guaranteed.

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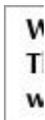
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Such promises were craved by Japan, whose relatively good image as a producer of high-quality agricultural and industrial items as well as a tourist destination has been shattered by the drawn-out emergency at the radiation-spewing Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

In documents from the meeting, the three countries agreed on the importance of taking "necessary responses prudently on the safety of products based upon scientific evidence in case of a nuclear accident."

A Japanese official emphasized the significance of the reference to the scientific grounds, saying it is the first time for such expressions to be written in a diplomatic statement since the Fukushima crisis.

"I believe this symbolizes political support shown by the leaders of China and South Korea, and hope it will help change the attitudes" of importers and consumers in the two countries, the official said.

In the summit talks, the three countries also retained the goal set last year of having 26 million people visit each other's countries in 2015, almost double the figure for 2009, and agreed to boost student exchanges.

Japan expects the news footage of Wen and South Korean President Lee Myung Bak visiting Fukushima Prefecture and eating locally grown fruits and vegetables to help alleviate consumer concerns over products and assure their people it is safe to travel to Japan.

But it remains unknown whether such political initiatives will truly help restore confidence in Japan among people in South Korea and China, as long as the nuclear crisis drags on.

Since March 11, the number of Japan-bound visitors has dropped sharply. In April, the figures logged year-on-year declines of 66.4 percent and 49.5 percent in South Korea and mainland China, respectively, according to an estimate by the Japan National Tourism Organization.

As for Japanese food and farm products, China is effectively blocking imports of almost all items, with authorities not satisfied with certificates currently issued by Japan to indicate radiation levels and place of origin.

Officially, Beijing bans imports from 12 prefectures, including Fukushima and Tokyo, but Wen told Kan on Sunday that China will lift the embargo on Yamanashi and Yamagata prefectures, reducing the number to 10, Foreign Ministry officials said.

The premier also said China will stop requiring certificates on radiation doses for imports of Japanese food and farm produce other than dairy, fishery and vegetable products, the officials said. Currently, such documents are

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necessary to ship any food and agricultural items from areas other than the banned zones.

South Korea now prohibits imports of leafy vegetables and mushrooms from Fukushima and its vicinity and requires products from other areas to be accompanied by certificates indicating radiation levels and places of origin issued by the Japanese government.

Despite some positive developments, Kuniyoshi Shirai, a risk management expert at ACE Consulting Inc., cast doubt on the effectiveness of Kan's strategy of visiting Fukushima and eating local farm products with Wen and Lee.

"The political gesture could merely be interpreted as a kind of test" for Chinese and South Korean leaders to check the degree of their sympathy and support to Japan, Shirai said. "Even if politicians munch on Fukushima farm produce, such action would not provide scientific safety assurance to convince people.

"Instead of trying to appeal to the emotions of (Chinese and South Korean) people with the visual image, Japan should take a logical and reasonable approach and present scientific data on radiation doses in accordance with international standards," he said.

Shirai said the government has lost trust globally due to its poor handling of information on the Fukushima crisis, saying it is "totally absurd" that it took two months for Tokyo Electric Power Co. to say that a fuel meltdown may have occurred in reactors at the crisis-hit plant.

To regain public confidence, the country should launch an aggressive public relations campaign to reach out to people around the world and ease their concerns by hosting seminars and disseminating information through social networking services, Shirai said.

The government has so far organized briefing sessions in Beijing, Shanghai and Seoul to provide updates on the nuclear crisis to Chinese and South Korean companies.

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