

Monday, December 12, 2005

Koreans warn of stepped-up protests

WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 3.14pm:

Protesters from South Korea - many of them farmers who say they have been negatively portrayed in Hong Kong's media - warn they might intensify their protests against the World Trade Organisation.

Protest organisers on Monday vowed to take "affirmative action" if the Hong Kong government violated their freedom of speech - but they did not elaborate on what type of protests they would launch.

Ju Jay-jun, the general co-ordinator of the Korean Struggle Mission - an umbrella group for the 1,500-strong Korean delegation - said they would mobilise as many people as they could for demonstrations.

The WTO ministerial meeting begins on Tuesday.

Yang Kyeong-kyoo, vice-president of the Interim Committee of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, said they had planned a strategy for their upcoming protests. "But I can't clarify [them] now," Mr Yang said on Monday.

He said he could not rule out the possibility of members committing suicide. In a notorious incident, a Korean farmer, Lee Kyung-hae, killed himself while protesting outside the WTO meeting in Cancun, Mexico, in 2003. Other Korean farmers have committed suicide in more recent protests.

Mr Ju and Mr Yang stressed that they would carry out non-violent protests. However, they criticised the Hong Kong media, saying it had tainted the image of Korean protesters.

Most of the farmers and rural workers from Korea would arrive on Monday, the delegation revealed.

The 1,500 protesters would participate in the two upcoming mass rallies organised by the Hong Kong People's Alliance on WTO on Tuesday and Sunday.

They would hold candle-lit vigils to commemorate Lee Kyung-hae from Wednesday until Saturday.

Korean protesters also plan to hand out leaflets explaining their view on the WTO to Hong Kong people.



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Monday, December 12, 2005

Mexican actor supports WTO protest

Updated at 5.40pm:

He is famous for playing a popular hero on screen - and in real life Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal is also a man of the people. On Monday, he met World Trade Organisation director-general Pascal Lamy in Hong Kong to discuss this week's ministerial meeting.

Bernal is best known for his Oscar-nominated role as Cuban rebel Che Guevara in the film *The Motorcycle Diaries*. But the actor says he is also concerned with how trade liberalisation will affect his fellow Mexicans.

Bernal joined Hong Kong musician Anthony Wong Yiu-ming and African singer Angelique Kidjo on Monday afternoon. Together, they handed 18 million petitions Oxfam had collected worldwide in its Big Noise campaign to Mr Lamy. The campaign aimed to raise awareness about people's concerns with the WTO's agenda to promote free trade.

"Fifty per cent of the population of Mexico is in poverty and I'm here to represent these families," Bernal said. "I'd also like to bring them back an explanation of [this meeting]."

Wong, who had been to Ghana with Oxfam in September, said he realised how rice farmers there were treated unfairly because of trade liberalisation.

"We're not isolated and we all belong to the World Village," Wong said, stressing that the situation in Africa concerned him.

He also urged Mr Lamy and trade ministers around the world to "do their best to make sure poorer farmers benefited from international trade".

Kidjo said that as a musician she wanted to stress the human side of trade negotiations, and how they would affect people in Africa.

Mr Lamy said he appreciated Oxfam's effort and urged them to continue with the campaign.

He said the WTO negotiations were already attempting to make trade fairer.



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WTO IN HK

Thirsty farmer rails against WTO deals

WINNIE YEUNG



Updated at 6.04pm:

Many ordinary people living in developing countries do not know how the trade-liberalisation policies of the World Trade Organisation may impact on their livelihoods. But Ashik Mathur, an Indian farmer living in the desert state of Rajasthan, says they will place him and his fellow villagers in a life-or-death situation.

He said the vital water supply to his village had been privatised because of recent WTO agreements. Water is the most precious resource there.

"This has a costly impact," he said in Hong Kong on Monday. "We've had a 15-day strike because of it. We are in fear everyday."

He also condemned his government's decision to contract out farmland in his area. He said this had caused farming to become a business for richer people and corporations - at the expense of independent farmers.

Mr Mathur was among the 200-strong delegation with the Peoples' Caravan for Justice and Sovereignty 2005. This is a protest group from 12 regions in Asia including Bangladesh, India and Cambodia. It is in Hong Kong at present to protest this week's WTO meeting.

For the past two months, its 5,000 member organisations have been travelling to Asia's villages and rural areas to explain how international trade will affect them.

Mr Mathur said they did not travel to these places in normal vehicles. Instead they travelled in bullock carts, bicycles - and even camels and elephants.

Chennaiah Poguri, the president of another member group, the National Alliance of Agriculture Workers' Union, said they had visited thousands of villages in India during the past two months.

He said most villagers were being "kept in the dark" and did not even know of the existence of the WTO.

"The Indian government never explained why they made the agreements and they never consulted the people," he said. "And it was never explained to the villagers how the WTO would affect them."

"For the southern countries, agriculture is livelihood," he said. "But for the northern countries, agriculture is only trade."

Mr Poguri also said the WTO agreements were "anti-people". He said he had visited villages where farmers were killing themselves because of the loss of livelihood brought by WTO agreements.



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Monday, December 12, 2005

French activist denied entry into HK

WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 7.47pm:

A famous French activist - who made international newspaper headlines for destroying a partly-built McDonald's restaurant in 1999 - was denied entry into Hong Kong on Monday afternoon.

José Bové is not allowed to enter Hong Kong although he is officially accredited for the World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting, which will begin on Tuesday.

He has never been expelled by other host countries at previous WTO meetings.

The 52-year-old farmer-turned-unionist is now a leader of the Confédération Paysanne in France. His distinctive moustache and famous feud with the golden arches turned him into one of the most recognisable protesters in the world.

He was jailed for three months after vandalising a McDonald's restaurant at the French town of Millau with nine other protesters in August, 1999 to protest against globalisation.

A French judge also barred him from participating in the WTO talks in Cancun two years ago. Instead, Mr Bové held his own summit in a small French town called Cancon.

Paul Nicholson, a spokesman of La Via Campesina - of which Mr Bové was a member - told *SCMP.com* they had been contacting the famous protester, but lost contact with him on Monday evening. He believed Mr Bové was still in Hong Kong.

He said the move by the Hong Kong government came as a "complete surprise". Mr Nicholson added that Mr Bové had a "non-violent" record as a protester. "He only 'dismantled' an unfinished restaurant," he added.

Mr Nicholson also said they had learnt that other protesters liaising with them were not able to come to Hong Kong. But he could not confirm the exact number of them and where the protesters were from.

The Immigration Department issued a written statement to *SCMP.com* on Monday evening. But it said that the department would not comment on individual cases. It explained that the government would "handle entry applications including those relating to the Hong Kong Ministerial Conference in accordance with the existing laws and established policy."



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Thursday, December 15, 2005

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WTO IN HK

Korean protesters show their human side

WINNIE YEUNG

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Korean Peasants League member Han Gi-hyung.
Picture by Winnie Yeung

Updated at 2.57pm:

They might be called militant protesters and appear prone to violence when clashing with police, but members of the "infamous" Korean Peasants League (KPL) showed a gentler side at a press conference on Thursday morning.

Although they seemed to have a hard time showing it at first – the six speakers on stage were told to smile by another member in order to look relaxed for the photographers.

When one league member, Han Gi-hyung, saw a photographer taking his picture, he joked: "I apologise for not shaving, and having a beard today. Please make sure I look good in your pictures."

Mr Han said he was "a little hurt" by negative coverage KPL had received in the Hong Kong press in recent months.

"I'd like to make an appeal to the Hong Kong media to write about why we are here instead of focusing on the violence," he said, adding: "I'm hurt by your pens, which are like swords to me."

Mr Han also said all he wanted to do when not farming was to go out with his family. But liberalisation of the agricultural market in Korea had driven him to become a protester.

Another farmer, Lee Ha-young, said it was particularly hurtful when people called them "rich farmers".

Mr Han also said they would not spend their spare time "enjoying Hong Kong". Their members had made a lot of effort to save money to come to the territory.

He said the only thing they would do to relax during their stay was drink beer during meals.

League members also criticised the World Trade Organisation and Hong Kong police.

KPL's general secretary Park Min-ung said the group would continue to use non-violent protests. But he said they were disappointed that the WTO and the local authorities did not want to hear their anti-free trade views.

"We demand to be heard. If we could not get a dialogue with the people who made the decision in WTO, there would be consequences," he said, refusing to elaborate.

The Korean delegation had warned on Monday it would escalate their protests on Saturday. It also said it might do so earlier if police violated their freedom of speech.

Liaison officer Lee Young-soo said there were many ways to define violence, but the KPL would fight with their bare hands only.

He criticised the police for setting a fixed route for rallies and forcing them to be restrained. "This is undemocratic," he said.

He also said they would march as much as possible on Saturday if there were no signs of the WTO letting their voices be heard.

The KPL has been stereotyped as violent protesters after repeated clashes with Korean police in recent years. They have also attracted the most attention since coming to Hong Kong and had received many interview requests.

The KPL said Thursday's press conference would be the last chance for the press to talk to them in Hong Kong.

Mr Lee told SCMP.com that Korean parliament member Kang Ki-kab, who is also their vice president, had been lobbying for them in the NGO centre at the Convention and Exhibition Centre.

But he believed the effect of this would be minimal.

The KPL would participate in the Thursday afternoon rally at the Wan Chai cargo area with other Korean protesters.

They would perform a Buddhist ritual throughout the whole rally – walking three steps and kneeling down to bow before standing up again for the next three steps.

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Thursday, December 15, 2005

Some Korean farmers who jumped into harbour could not swim

WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 3.06pm:

Some of the Korean farmers who jumped into Victoria Harbour on Tuesday admitted on Thursday they did not know how to swim. Some had also considered taking their life jackets off.

About 100 Korean farmers plunged into the water on Tuesday from the Wan Chai cargo area after protesting. They then tried to swim to the Convention and Exhibition Centre — where the World Trade Organisation meeting is being held. Most of the protesters climbed back up by themselves, but some were picked up by firemen nearby.

One person suffered hypothermia afterwards.

Korean Peasants League member Han Do-sook, who also jumped into the water, revealed at a press conference on Thursday that he and many others could not swim.

“We once even talked about throwing away the life jackets,” the 40-year-old farmer told *SCMP.com*.

Another member, Han Gi-hyung, said although he knew how to swim, he and some other protesters were “a little afraid” before jumping.

“I have never been in Hong Kong water before,” he said. “But my fear disappeared once I jumped because I remembered it was my desperate call to show refusal and resistance to the WTO.”

Mr Han said the gesture was necessary to get their anti-free trade message heard. “I am not sure how Hong Kong people feel about our actions, but we would all do it again,” he added.



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Thursday, December 15, 2005

Koreans launch peaceful protest, but promise tougher action

WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 8.22pm:

Korean protesters say they will escalate their protest actions on Friday — after finishing their first and only peaceful rally in Hong Kong on Thursday afternoon.

Their rally on Thursday was a Korean-Buddhist ritual which impressed Hong Kong people who watched it. The protesters walked for three steps, then knelt down to bow, before standing up again for another three steps — all the way from Victoria Park to Wan Chai.

The Korean Struggle Mission, which was the umbrella group for all the 1,500 Korean protesters coming to Hong Kong, vowed they would “enter a new stage of their struggle”.

This was triggered after police confiscated a truck the protesters used for their sound system at the beginning of the march. A police spokesman said they had to check the vehicle before protesters could use it.

The Koreans had vowed earlier this week to escalate their protest actions on Saturday.

“We’ve been very patient by using peaceful means today,” said Korean Peasants’ League general secretary Park Min-ung through a translator.

“But if you keep on interfering and trying to sabotage our peaceful march, if you try to suppress us — then there would be consequences. The blame would lie with the Hong Kong authorities,” he warned.

Hong Kong People’s Alliance chairwoman Elizabeth Tang Yin-ngor said she had no idea why the truck had been confiscated. She said the alliance had used the same vehicle for its sound system during Tuesday’s march. Then, police had no problem with it. “This is an act of provocation,” she said.

Police returned the truck to the protesters after they arrived at their destination — the Wan Chai cargo area. But Korean protest leaders said they were not happy about it, and pledged to step up their protests.

The protesters left Victoria Park on Thursday afternoon. They then started to march off accompanied by the Buddhist ritual. They explained that this symbolised the unification of heaven, earth, and mankind. The protesters, many of whom are farmers, also said it symbolised their respect for the land. While many protesters were middle-aged, some were also elderly. They all wore knee pads and gloves dyed red.

The rally took longer than the previous ones because of the Buddhist ritual, which was very tiring for the participants. They needed to lie down to rest from time to time.

But the demonstration impressed a number of locals, who had gathered to watch and take photographs. Some cheered the demonstrators.

The rally was also the first one which predominantly featured Koreans, who have developed a reputation for militant anti-WTO protests.

Police on Thursday were on full alert with more officers stationed at different corners along the route. Police set up two barricades — instead of one — outside the cargo area of Hung Hing Road.

The Koreans had clashed with police on Tuesday and Wednesday at Hung Hing Road, outside an exit of the Wanchai Sportsground.

The first barricade was set up further from the Convention and Exhibition Centre on Thursday — at the intersection of Marsh and Hung Hing Road. “We’ve been told to stand here, that’s why we’re here,” explained one police officer.

However, the extra police officers called in were not necessary. This was because Koreans decided to hold a peaceful gathering at the cargo area on Thursday evening.

Many roads in Wan Chai and Causeway Bay had been blocked throughout most of Thursday when the three rallies had taken place.



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Thursday December 8 2005

Filipino protesters detained at airport: spokesmen

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WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 7.24pm:

Three protesters from the Philippines who plan to participate in anti-World Trade Organisation activities next week were detained at the airport for seven hours on Thursday, spokesmen for the trio said.

They were Carol Pagaduan-Araullo, vice-chairwoman for External Affairs of the International League of People's Struggle (ILPS); Elisa Lubi of ILPS-Philippine Section; and Norma Binas of Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU, May First Movement). The three arrived at Hong Kong International Airport on Chek Lap Kok at 10am.

But Immigration officials stopped them and took them into a room at the airport for questioning. They were released about 4.30pm.

Next week's WTO conference in the territory is expected to attract many anti-globalisation protesters. There are concerns that some demonstrations could become violent as they have at previous WTO meetings.

A liaison officer for the three in Hong Kong, Aaron Ceradoy, told *SCMP.com* the three Filipinos, one of whom is believed to be more than 50 years old, were questioned twice. Their bags were also searched.

Ramon Bultron, managing director of the Asia-Pacific Mission for Migrants, told *SCMP.com* the three were asked about their upcoming activities in Hong Kong. They were questioned about whether they would join any protests and asked who sponsored their trip to Hong Kong.

He said the three people had never been involved in any violent protests in their home country. The three had said they had no idea why they were detained.

"I've called the Immigration Department at noon to assure them that the three people are with us," Mr Bultron said.

The detainees and Immigration Department could not be reached for comment. The government met the Hong Kong People's Alliance on WTO, the local organiser of next week's protests, on Thursday. They agreed to set up a direct hotline to handle the issue of foreign protesters coming to Hong Kong.

Thursday December 8 2005

HK woos hedge funds

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WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 6.12pm:

The government was committed to promoting Hong Kong as a leading asset-management centre in Asia, Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury Frederick Ma Si-hang said on Thursday.

In a speech to the Hong Kong: Hedge Fund Hub of Asia Conference 2005, Mr Ma noted that hedge funds were becoming increasingly popular.

Hedge funds are speculative funds that manage investments for private investors. They are exempt from many of the rules and regulations which cover other mutual funds; this allows them to achieve aggressive investing goals. They are mostly registered offshore. Mutual funds pool together money from many investors and invest it on behalf of the group, in accordance with a stated set of objectives.

The Financial Services Secretary said Hong Kong was one of the first places to allow sales of hedge funds to the public.

"With the increasing popularity of hedge funds, hedge-fund activities are becoming an integral part of asset management strategy," he said.

Mr Ma said fund management activities surveys conducted by the Securities and Futures Commission in the past few years revealed considerable growth in Hong Kong's asset management industry.

"[Last year] Hong Kong's total asset management business, which includes asset management, advisory business and other private banking business, increased 23 per cent over 2003 to \$3.618 trillion.

"Of the \$3.618 trillion, about \$2.9 trillion came from asset management and advisory business, which represented an increase of about 100 per cent over the corresponding

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business which represented an increase of about 100 per cent over the corresponding figure in 2000," he added.

Mr Ma said the Revenue (Abolition of Estate Duty) Bill 2005, passed last month by the Legislative Council, aimed to help develop Hong Kong as an asset-management centre.

"We are confident that more local and overseas investors will be attracted to hold assets here," he said. The ordinance will come into effect on February 11.

The government was also proposing offshore funds be exempted from tax for profits derived from specified transactions in Hong Kong. Legco is currently scrutinising the bill.

Mr Ma said there were an estimated 113 hedge funds operating in Hong Kong by end of last year, with US\$12.4 billion (HK\$96 billion) worth of assets under management.

Of these, 13 (about 11.5 per cent) were retail hedge funds. These were authorised by the SFC and had an aggregate net asset size of US\$1.2 billion. This is a more than a seven-fold jump in asset size from 2002 to last year.

The majority of authorised hedge funds had a fund size of less than US\$100 million each. The biggest fund was more than US\$500 million.

Tuesday December 6 2005

Nine protest rallies planned during WTO meeting

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WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 7.07pm:

At least nine rallies instead of just three would be held next week in Hong Kong when the World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting takes place, protest organisers said on Tuesday.

On top of the three major rallies organised by the Hong Kong People's Alliance at the WTO, which has an expected turnout of 10,000, other international groups will also participate in the rallies. Representatives of these groups announced on Tuesday that they would organise their own rallies throughout next week.

This will include rallies at consulates next Wednesday, marches with fishermen and women workers on Thursday and Friday, and a rally with sex workers on Saturday, they announced.

But there are no estimates available yet for the size of these rallies.

There would also be a seaborne protest on the Victoria Harbour by Asian fishermen next Wednesday. A total of over 120 activities would be held throughout the week.

Besides attending the rallies, the 1,400-strong Korean delegation would disperse all around Hong Kong next Thursday and Friday to distribute leaflets, its representative Jeon Sohi confirmed on Tuesday.

The Korean Peasants League which has a reputation for militant protests would be among the delegation.

Ms Jeon insisted that only two or three people would be in each area and would not cause any problems. But she did not elaborate on what activities the farmers planned to do.

Korean farmers developed a reputation for violent protests after one killed himself protesting outside the WTO meeting in Cancun, Mexico two years ago.

Two farmers also committed suicide in the past month in Korea. They were protesting their government's decision to further liberalise agricultural markets.

Ms Jeon said she was disappointed by the Hong Kong media's negative coverage of Korean farmers. She stressed they would carry out protests peacefully next week.

Tuesday December 6 2005

Attack and murder motivated by drug-related debts: reports

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WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 4.31pm:

Two brothers attacked on Monday night in Tsing Yi - resulting in the death of one - are believed to be drug addicts.

Sources quoted in Hong Kong's Chinese language papers on Tuesday said the two men

Sources quoted in Hong Kong's Chinese language papers on Tuesday said the two men were attacked because they had owed money to a drug dealer.

The brothers, surnamed Tsang, were found with chop wounds around 8.30pm. They were lying on the 21st floor of On Pak House at Cheung On Estate.

One brother, aged 53, was found in a corridor while the other, aged 48, was in a flat - on the same floor where the pair lived.

They were rushed to the Princess Margaret Hospital, but the older brother was pronounced dead at 9pm.

The Chinese language newspapers reported that the brothers often went to Tak Wah Park in Tsuen Wan to purchase illegal drugs. Their attacker, who is believed to be a drug dealer, also operated there.

Initial reports reveal that police officers found an ounce of heroin at a nearby park and illegal drugs in a canopy at the estate. A post-mortem examination would be conducted later on Tuesday. The case is now being investigated by the District Crime Squad of Kwai Tsing.

Monday December 5 2005

Huge police presence planned for WTO meeting

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WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 7.10pm:

One in three police officers in Hong Kong would be working on next week's World Trade Organisation meeting - the largest police team for a single event in Hong Kong history.

Police director of operations Peter Yam Tat-wing said on Monday that 9,000 officers among the 27,000-strong police force would be deployed especially for the week-long WTO meeting - which starts next Tuesday.

The police would also use auxiliary officers to help carry out everyday duties.

No officers would be able to take leave during this period and their working hours would be extended.

Mr Yam said police would be fully prepared for worse-case scenarios, although he refused to elaborate on what these might be.

He did not rule out the need for the use of force, saying the police would do everything necessary to ensure the WTO meeting went smoothly. The rights of protesters and the public would be protected.

But Mr Yam said he expected the three major protests organised by the Hong Kong People's Alliance on the WTO (HKPA) - with a predicted turnout of 6,000 to 11,000 - would be peaceful.

He also said the HKPA would arrange 350 to 500 volunteers to help maintain order during the rallies.

The first protest would be held on Sunday. It would start at Victoria Park and finish at Central Government Offices in Central.

The other two would be held on December 13 and 18. They would also start at Victoria Park, but finish at the Wan Chai cargo loading area. The area would be one of the two designated protest areas during the meeting.

The Transport Department has also set up a hotline for inquiries from the public on the special traffic arrangement next week. For further details, contact, tel: 183-4567.

Monday December 5 2005

Indonesian association claims consulate warned them to avoid WTO protests

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WINNIE YEUNG

Updated at 4.47pm:

An Indonesian migrant workers' association claims the Indonesian consulate has warned them not to participate in any protests during next week's World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting.

But the consulate on Monday denied these claims. It said it had only advised Indonesians in Hong Kong to be careful about protests.

The Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong said a radio broadcast of an announcement from the Indonesian consulate had advised workers not to go to Victoria Park next week. It said they could get hurt during WTO demonstrations.

The association said the announcement was made on a morning radio programme on

The association said the announcement was made on a morning radio programme on Metro Plus ? broadcast in Indonesian on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

It also warned that if any workers were injured during protests their employers' insurance policies would not cover them.

Association chairwoman Eni Lestari said she was upset by the announcement. She said it was ?very bad propaganda? from the Indonesian government.

But a spokesman for the Indonesian consulate, Mr Nugroho, told *SCMP.com* the consulate had never released a radio announcement on the upcoming WTO meeting.

He said there was only an article from the consul-general published in the monthly paper *Suara* last month. This had advised people to be ?careful and cautious? when they were in Victoria Park next week.

?We are in no position to advise our people not to go to Victoria Park. Hong Kong is a democratic [city],? said Mr Nugroho, who like most Indonesians uses one name.

But Ms Lestari said employment agencies for Indonesian domestic workers had also given similar warnings to their employees, warning workers to avoid Victoria Park next week.

It is understood the Asosiasi PPTKI Hong Kong ? the umbrella group for 175 employment agencies for Indonesian domestic workers ? issued guidelines last month advising employers not to let their workers take any leave during the WTO meeting next week.

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