

Japan drags itself towards an open rice market.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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TOKYO, Dec 13 (Reuters) - Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Masayoshi Takemura said Tokyo had every intention of making a decision on opening the country's rice market by late Monday.

Leaders of the eight-group ruling coalition were to meet during the evening to decide whether to accept a GATT compromise plan that would bring a trickle of rice imports over six years before a "total" opening of the market with stiff tariffs on imports.

Foreign Minister Tsutomu Hata, despatched to Geneva at the weekend in a vain bid to wrest last-minute concessions from General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiators, has already said Japan would make an official announcement on Monday.

"We must have a resolution to decide on accepting the GATT proposal even as Japan faces a big turning point in a difficult situation," Kyodo news agency quoted him as saying on returning to Tokyo.

The slow-motion drama was played out as the first shipment of U.S. rice in 26 years arrived in Japan in the east coast port of Kobe as part of the government's emergency rice imports.

Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa told parliament earlier he believed the GATT was nearing an overall accord ahead of its December 15 deadline.

Peter Sutherland, director general of the world trade body, said a multilateral negotiating session to finalise the text of a new world trade treaty had been an "amazing success" and that the text was almost complete.

Typically, Japanese officials sought to hedge their concession around with escape clauses.

Hosokawa told parliament Japan had won concessions that GATT would give "due consideration" to the nation's food security and environmental issues when it reconsiders Japan's moratorium on rice import tariffication in six years.

Farm Minister Eihiro Hata said Japan took the GATT proposal "seriously", a word often repeated during the day.

He said even if the GATT plan was accepted, tariffication was not to be taken for granted.

If Japan accepted the GATT plan, its strategy would be to seek an extension of the six-year moratorium, Hata said.

The Socialists, the biggest group in the ruling coalition, were the only wild card in this carefully orchestrated play.

Party chiefs, resolutely opposed to foreign rice, were meeting in conclave as about 100 angry farmers demonstrated on the streets outside.

Socialist Party Chairman Tomiichi Murayama was expected to hold a news conference later on Monday. If the party makes good on a threat to quit the coalition over the rice issue, Japan could be looking at its second snap election in six months.

Barely noticed in the hubbub was the arrival of 7,200 tonnes of California rice that slipped into Kobe with only a handful of protesters.

Part of 1.1 million tonnes of emergency imports the Japanese Food Agency plans to make by the end of March, the shipment followed the nation's worst rice harvest since World War Two.

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