

Four killed in New Caledonia airport blockade

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Four people were killed and 23 injured in the French-controlled Pacific islands of New Caledonia on August 6 when several hundred protesters blockading a small airport were attacked by an equal number of armed opponents. The protest, over the high cost of domestic air travel, had closed the airport on Maré, an island of 6,000 people in the Loyalty archipelago group.

The unrest and killings alarmed Paris, with the minister for overseas territories, Marie-Luce Penchard, interrupting a Caribbean holiday for urgent talks. She later announced that a “mediation” process, overseen by two churches, would be set up.

According to reports, the dead were all young men, aged about 20, but it is not yet clear whether the victims were mainly protesters or those who attacked them. Several of the injured were evacuated by helicopter to the capital Noumea. Two military platoons, comprising 120 French army and police, along with several helicopters and a French army transport plane, were sent to Maré to clear the airport barricades.

Air travel is the principal means of transport between the outer islands and Noumea, on the main island of Grand Terre. From July 22, airports on the outlying islands of Lifou, Maré and the Isle of Pines were blockaded by protesters following fare increases by the local carrier, Air Caledonie. The airline had warned that the crisis was costing it \$US120,000 a day and it was facing bankruptcy. It also claimed that the tourist industry would be badly damaged.

A passengers’ collective barricaded Maré airport and blocked entry to a local village. Last Saturday night,

300 people from the Ghuama district, whose chief, Nidoish Naisseline, is the Air Caledonie chairman, tried to break up the protest. Stones were thrown, then shots were fired and the four, including Naisseline’s nephew, were killed. An Agence France-Presse correspondent described people armed with hunting rifles and machetes, on roads lined with burnt-out cars.

Several days after the killings, clashes spilled over into the streets of Noumea as the protests continued. At least one person was hospitalised. Protesters vowed to remain at the airports and Air Caledonie planes were prevented from using both Lifou and Maré. According to Radio New Zealand, a government-sponsored protocol was to be signed on August 17 to provide for a three-month moratorium to address the “situation at Air Caledonie and the cost of travel” to the outlying islands. Meanwhile, more than 140 police have been deployed to the islands to “restore order.” An investigation into the killings has begun, but no arrests have been made.

The protests are a sign of explosive social unrest in New Caledonia, which is beset with endemic unemployment among indigenous Kanaks, who make up 44 percent of the population, and a deepening divide between rich and poor. In May, thousands of people joined protests and a three-day rolling strike called by the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) over the high cost of living. Up to 10,000 rallied in Noumea, while marches took place in the Northern Province and the Loyalty Islands. Businesses and schools were closed, and domestic and international flights cancelled.

In an attempt to derail the movement, protest leaders

and unions met with the government during the strikes. Union leaders initially declared that “structural change” was needed in the economy because living costs had become “unbearable.” But they wound up the protests when the government promised to “consult” over a package of measures, which it falsely claimed would raise people’s buying power and lower prices.

Figures released recently from the 2009 census indicate significant wealth disparities. The Loyalty Islands is the most impoverished province, with the monthly household income less than half that of the richest province, the Southern region, centred on Noumea. A quarter of Loyalty Islands households earned less than €419 (\$US604) per month, whereas the median for the Southern province was €3,059. The colony’s unemployment rate is over 16 percent, with many of the jobless young Kanaks aged 20-24 years.

The French-ruled territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia (Tahiti) have the highest living costs in the Pacific. Almost everything, from food to automobiles, fuel and essential commodities, has to be imported. Rising international prices hit ordinary people hard. Some 40 percent of the local workforce is paid only the basic minimum wage of €1,106 per month. Even middle class wage earners are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. The protests in May were called after inflation jumped during April. In mid-2010, annual inflation was running at 3.2 percent.

The protests over the cost of living have emerged against a backdrop of political instability. Tensions over the unresolved issue of independence from France led to four successive collapses of coalition governments over a four-month period earlier this year. In an attempt to resolve the deepening crisis, the electoral law was changed last month to provide future governments with an 18-month period of “grace” before they can be removed from office.

Provoked by a dispute over which flag the territory should use, bitter rifts have divided the anti-independence parties. The current practice, endorsed by Paris, is for the joint use of the French tricolour and the flag used by the Kanak independence movement. The

former pro-French president, Philippe Gomes, however, has proposed there should be a new single flag.

The unions, led by USTKE, declared that the Kanak flag “won’t ever be lowered” because the history of the Kanak people “cannot be ignored.” In April, the French High Commission banned rival marches over the flags, citing “security” concerns. Independence for New Caledonia is not on the agenda—a proposed referendum on the issue is not expected to be held until at least somewhere between 2014 and 2019.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy is due to visit New Caledonia later this month. His presidency has been marked by cost-of-living revolts in several of France’s overseas territories. In 2009, general strikes in the Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique broke out over the government’s refusal to meet demands for a monthly 200-euro rise in wages and social benefits for the 45,000 lowest-paid. Demonstrations mobilised up to 100,000 of Guadeloupe’s 500,000 inhabitants and 25,000 of Martinique’s population of 400,000. Police reinforcements were sent to both islands to repress what one government minister called an “insurrectionary” situation.



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