Five dead, three missing in New Caledonia landslides

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Authorities in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia have called off searches for three people missing in the wake of widespread flooding that caused massive landslides last month near the small indigenous Kanak settlement of Houailou, on the east coast of the main island.

Five bodies were recovered, including two children, in mud that descended on the villages of Ouakaya and Gouareu after torrential rain weakened a nearby mountain side. Still missing are a 34-year-old man and a 26-year-old woman, as well as an eight-year-old girl. Another eight people were injured, while a number of houses were washed away and 80 villagers lost all their possessions.

Over 400 millimetres of torrential rain fell in 12 hours overnight on November 22, causing widespread destruction. Millions of tonnes of rocks and mud were washed off the mountain in what authorities described as "unprecedented" landslides. More torrential rain later forced about 200 people to evacuate to emergency accommodation.

Relief teams managed to restore most of the water and power supply systems in flood-affected areas of the east coast by November 25. Residents close to streams and mountainsides have been warned of the risk of more problems, and schools in the flood-affected areas were closed.

Radio New Zealand reported that New Caledonia's president, Philippe Germain, described the catastrophe as one "not seen since the 19th century." Germain said damage assessments were under way and the French government promised to release emergency assistance. However, the government released only $US18,000 to the Red Cross to help the victims.

The destruction and loss of life were predictable and entirely preventable. The affected zone is on customary land where building permits are not required. The villages were hit by landslides which came off a mountain range that the mayor of Houailou, Pascal Sawa, said had been weakened by nickel mining and bush fires. The area was deemed in danger after major slips in 2008 and 2011.

Nearby mining activity by transnational conglomerates is known to exacerbate the risk of mudslides. There is widespread opposition, particularly among the local Kanak population, to the unregulated activities of the mining companies that cause major environmental degradation, often on traditional native lands.

In May 2014 the Brazilian-owned Vale nickel plant at Goro, near the capital Noumea, was shut for three weeks after 100,000 litres of effluent containing acid entered a creek, killing about 1,000 fish and sparking protests at the mine site. The Southern provincial government ordered a halt to operations and started legal proceedings under its environmental code after the spill.

Such repeated incidents have prompted calls for the $US6 billion plant to be closed permanently. Clashes erupted between police and scores of Kanak youth after the 2014 spill. About 150 riot police with armoured vehicles were used to reopen a key road south of Noumea which was blockaded during the unrest. Young protesters frustrated at the spill, and the apparent lack of response from Kanak chiefs, caused an estimated $US20 million in damage to Vale offices and vehicles.

The adverse ecological impacts of the activities of mining companies have previously brought protests from environmental groups. A 1991 study by the South Pacific Regional Environmental Program observed that 1 million tonnes of solid mass of dumped material from

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the nickel mines caused a shift of the delta of a lagoon by about 300 metres due to sedimentation. Erosion of hill slopes is reported to have continued even after the closure of some open-cut mines on the main island's east coast.

According to the Ramsar Organization, many wetlands in interior regions have either been lost or spoiled. Rivers and streams have been choked with tailings from the waste material dumped from the mines. This has resulted in a rise in river bed levels and consequent flooding of fertile agricultural lands. Many river delta areas and coral reefs have been affected, creating changes in aquatic flora and fauna.

The mining companies have long received favoured treatment by the New Caledonia political establishment and French authorities. The industry is the territory's biggest private sector employer, accounting for a quarter of all jobs and 7–10 percent of its output. When tourism is excluded, nickel ore and derived metallurgical products represent about 97 percent of exports and 80 percent of foreign exchange earnings.

France's Socialist Party government recently announced tax concessions amounting to $200 million to avert a closure of the Koniambo nickel plant in the Northern province. The key investor, Swiss-based Glencore, which has a worldwide debt of $30 billion, had cast doubt on the company's future in the wake of a 40 percent drop in the global market price of nickel. The New Caledonian industry recorded losses of $1 billion in 2015. The French state has also helped prop up the territory's two other nickel producers, SLN and Vale.

The oppressed Kanaks, who make up 44 percent of the territory's 270,000 population, invariably bear the brunt of the activities of the corporations. Under French colonial rule, the Kanaks are socially disenfranchised, with many continuing to live in primitive, subsistence circumstances in outlying rural villages. Noumea is a polarised capital, where many low-paid workers live in slum conditions. Bitter industrial disputes involving workers in the mines and nickel smelters, and disturbances involving alienated Kanak youth, are on the rise.

A century or more of colonial domination and indifference, particularly by the local imperialist powers Australia and New Zealand, has also left the island states of the southwest Pacific underdeveloped and vulnerable to increasingly frequent severe weather events resulting from climate change. Last summer, a powerful El Niño weather pattern hit an estimated 4.7 million people across 13 Pacific countries, with food and water shortages leading to suffering and many deaths. In a report released last October, the Catholic aid agency Caritas detailed multiple social and humanitarian disasters following cyclones Pam and Winston in 2015 and earlier this year.

Last month flooding and landslides hit two provinces in the Solomon Islands as heavy rain moved across the country. Landslides also affected the capital, Honiara. Australia's ABC 'Pacific Beat' reported on November 25 that 7,500 people on Bougainville's Nissan Island are experiencing an unprecedented food shortage, with their crops devastated by a series of extreme weather events, culminating in a year of constant torrential rain. With no assistance from the Autonomous Bougainville Government, the situation is becoming dire.

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