

New Caledonia unrest continues amid massive French security operation

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French President Emmanuel Macron is flying to New Caledonia today in a direct attempt to shut down riots and unrest that have enveloped the colony for the past eight days.

Macron said the main objective was to “install” a “dialogue mission” to resume political talks with all stakeholders and find a “political solution” to the crisis. Macron’s spokesperson Prisca Thévenot said a “return to order” was a preliminary condition for any talks.

The French Pacific territory has entered a second week of unrest despite the imposition of an emergency decree by Macron last Wednesday. Rioting, largely by indigenous Kanak youth, has devastated the island’s capital, Nouméa. By Friday five people, three young Kanaks and two gendarmes, had been killed.

The rioting erupted as the French National Assembly pushed through a constitutional amendment to allow French residents who have lived in New Caledonia for 10 years since 1998 the right to vote in provincial elections and for the 54-member Congress. The move is opposed by pro-independence leaders who claim it will dilute the vote of indigenous Kanaks, who make up over 40 percent of the population.

The protests, involving thousands of Kanaks, have been met with fierce repression from the French state and been confronted with armed pro-France vigilante groups. So far 230 people have been arrested. The 12-day state of emergency gives authorities extensive powers to ban gatherings, impose travel bans, and conduct house arrests and searches.

A contingent of 1,000 French police and army reinforcements arrived on Friday, bringing armed security personnel to 2,700, including riot and crowd control squads.

Over the weekend, the media reported an “uneasy calm” had settled over Nouméa’s suburbs, where scenes of violence, arson and confrontation had continued throughout Friday. Despite the military-police crackdown, however, enforcement agencies still had not regained control of the capital’s central districts, with fires and other damage occurring overnight Saturday.

France’s High Commissioner Louis Le Franc claimed: “With massive reinforcement, we will soon be able to regain control of these areas.” But Nouméa’s mayor, Sonia Lagarde, said while overnight violence had eased due to a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew, “we are far from a return to normal.” “The situation is not improving—quite the contrary—despite all the appeals for calm,” she said, adding that Nouméa was “under siege.”

The unrest has spread to rural areas. On Saturday, a sixth death was reported after a man was killed near the town of Kaala-Gomen, about 355 kms north of the capital, in an exchange of gunfire at one of many barricades blocking roads on the island. Le Franc said security forces would stage “harassment” raids to reclaim other parts of the territory held by pro-independence groups.

A major armed police operation was mounted Sunday to regain control of the main roads in and around Nouméa. Le Franc warned: “Republican order will be re-established whatever the cost.” More than 600 gendarmes used tanks to clear protesters and roadblocks from the road connecting Nouméa with Tontouta International Airport, which remains closed for commercial flights until further notice.

On Monday Macron claimed that there was “clear progress in the restoration of order,” while authorizing the military deployed to bolster police protecting public buildings in Nouméa. *Islands Business* correspondent Nic Maclellan reported scattered attacks were still occurring around the capital, including on shops and businesses. Roadblocks were also maintained by pro-independence forces into the Northern Province.

Australian and New Zealand governments yesterday began dispatching military aircraft to evacuate their citizens after French authorities authorised the flights to land at the domestic airport. According to Maclellan, the foreign ministers of Australia and NZ had earlier contacted their French counterpart to “press action” over delays.

France remains determined to tighten its grip on the colony. As the US and its allies prepare for war against China, French imperialism is seeking to play a role in the

militarisation of the Pacific. New Caledonia hosts a major French military base and holds nearly a quarter of the world's reserves of nickel, essential in the manufacture of stainless steel and in the arms industry.

French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal has been chairing daily meetings of an “inter-ministerial crisis cell” involving Overseas Minister Gérald Darmanin, his deputy Marie Guévenoux, Army Minister Sébastien Lecornu and Justice Minister Eric Dupont-Moretti. On Friday, Attal met leaders of the parliamentary parties to discuss whether to extend the state of emergency beyond 12 days, which would require the approval of both the lower house National Assembly and the Senate.

Two pro-France parties, Les Loyalistes and Rassemblement, told a press conference on Tuesday that to withdraw the constitutional amendment would amount to “condoning the rioters and looters’ actions.” “Terrorism, violence must not win (...) We’re asking the French State to restore law and order,” local pro-France politician Virginie Ruffenach declared.

Pro-independence figures led by the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) have been calling for the measure to be scrapped and that a French “dialogue mission”—similar to the delegations sent by Paris before the signing of the 1998 Nouméa Accord—headed by a “high, recognised and independent official” should come and negotiate a compromise.

The alliance of five pro-independence parties that make up the FLNKS represent an indigenous elite that has a vested interest in maintaining the existing voting arrangements, while posing no real alternative to the imperialist-dominated establishment.

New Caledonia’s President Louis Mapou— a Kanak politician from the National Union for Independence, part of the FLNKS— bluntly condemned the actions of the rioters, saying “anger cannot justify harming or destroying public property, production tools, all of which this country has taken decades to build.”

The explosive rioting has exposed the vast class chasm between Kanak workers and youth in particular and the colony’s wealthy layers. Maclellan posted on X/Twitter that the young people “burned symbols of wealth and targeted large shopping centres and businesses. They live in urban areas and face daily difficulties. With their families, they are in poverty. They don’t have a job.”

Andre Qaeze from Noumea’s Radio Djiido similarly told RNZ Pacific that Kanak youth “don’t have any training, they go out from school with no job... The rich become richer and the poor become poorer, and they say no, we have to change this economic model of sharing. I think this is the main problem.”

Amid an escalating economic crisis, with the vital nickel industry in turmoil and people reeling from escalating living costs, the official parties representing both pro-independence and rival anti-independence forces stand on the side of the business elite, opposing any meaningful measures to end poverty and social inequality.

Across the region, meanwhile, there is growing outrage over France’s repression. The Melanesian Spearhead Group, formed in 1986 by Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands to back decolonisation, blamed France for the riots and demanded it drop the electoral reform.

An alliance of over two dozen Pacific non-government organisations also condemned France for what they say is a “betrayal” of New Caledonia’s Kanak population. The Pacific Regional Non-Government Organisations (PRNGOs) condemned “the Macron government for its poorly hidden agenda of prolonging colonial control over the territory.”

The outgoing chair of the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum and Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown said “greater autonomy” for the indigenous Kanak population is needed. Noting that many Forum members are former colonies, Brown said Pacific peoples value “sovereignty” and the protests were in response to that.

The reality is that none of the impoverished Pacific Island countries are fully independent: all of them rely heavily on aid from the imperialist powers and their governments are subject to routine interference from Australia, New Zealand, the US and France. Some analysts are concerned, however, that France’s police repression could undermine the propaganda about an alliance of “democracies” seeking to push back against “autocratic” Chinese influence in the region.

Reuters reported that one commentator for the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, Oliver Nobetau, declared that the “heavy-handed” response to the protests by France would backfire in the region, where decolonisation was “expected.” “France is trying to re-emerge as a Pacific partner and this will evidently not help that image,” he warned.



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