

Pacific leaders' New Caledonia mission deferred over conflict with France

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A Pacific Island leaders' fact-finding mission to investigate the ongoing social upheaval in New Caledonia was suddenly deferred by the French territory's government this week.

Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders wrote to French President Emmanuel Macron in July seeking permission to send a Ministerial Committee to Nouméa to gather information "from all sides" in the crisis and to report back to the PIF Leaders' Summit in Tonga next week.

The mission was approved by Macron on August 10 with France's Ambassador to the Pacific Véronique Roger-Lacan, hand-delivering a letter giving the go-ahead to the Forum's secretariat in Suva, Fiji.

The mission, comprising PIF chair and Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown, Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Menele was expected to take place this week.

According to PIF chair Brown, the key task of the "monitoring and dialogue" mission was "to try to reduce the incidence of violence" and to appeal for talks between the different sides.

New Caledonia's pro-independence President Louis Mapou has now declared that the mission should be moved to a later date due to a conflict between Paris and the colonial government over who is ultimately responsible for the inspection.

"[The] French state decided to control alone [the] subject and object of the mission as well as its future conclusion," New Caledonia Congress President, Roch Wamytan, said in a statement sent to RNZ Pacific. Paris wants to "see what will come out of this mission and wants the mission only to denounce the violence in New Caledonia," he declared.

Wamytan said Roger-Lacan had earlier stressed that "the French State should organise this mission, since it was its responsibility to do so." She had, he insisted, thereby overlooked that New Caledonia is a full member of the PIF, and the request for the mission was made by Mapou.

Wamytan's statement bluntly asserted: "We consider that the French State dictates the purpose of the mission. We

consider this as an unacceptable form of humiliation. Clearly this mode of operation is an anachronistic neo-colonial practice." The PIF would be "belittled," he added, by "this backward-looking behaviour by the administrative power towards a non-self-governing territory."

Wamytan claimed France had seized the opportunity to "absolve itself of any responsibility" for the current situation. "President Mapou therefore considers that all the conditions for a successful mission have not been met," and should be deferred. The PIF also issued a statement concurring with the move.

A response from Macron's office posted on X/Twitter by Roger-Lacan declared: "The French State stands ready to host an information mission, when conditions permit, in conjunction with the local authorities."

A group of UN Special Rapporteurs issued a report this week excoriating Paris for acting to "dismantle" the 1998 Nouméa Accord which, it claimed, "outlines a process for the gradual and irreversible transfer of power from France to New Caledonia." The group described France's "exclusively repressive and judicial handling of a conflict whose object is the claim by an Indigenous People to its right to self-determination" as not only "anti-democratic, but deeply worrying for the rule of law."

Brown and other Pacific leaders have called on France to undertake another referendum on independence due to their "dissatisfaction" with the third referendum in 2021, which they deemed a "forceful and unilateral decision by the French State." That poll saw a 96 percent vote to remain with France after it was boycotted by the independence movement.

Macron has already ruled out another referendum. While manoeuvring to install a far-right government in Paris in defiance of the results of last month's snap election, Macron will do whatever is necessary to maintain his grip in New Caledonia, including the ongoing police-military crackdown.

At the same time, the "anti-colonial" posturing by New Caledonia's official pro-independence leadership is rooted in concerns that it has been sharply exposed by the

widespread social unrest, triggered by poverty and inequality, which erupted outside their control and continues despite pressure by Macron to bring it to heel.

For their part, the Pacific governments, including Australia and New Zealand, are well aware that if the situation cannot be brought under control, the unrest in New Caledonia could be a spark for similar protests and riots across the impoverished region, where living standards are being ground down by inflation.

The violent rebellion broke out over three months ago, driven largely by alienated Kanak youth, after the French parliament passed a constitutional amendment to boost voter eligibility in New Caledonia's local elections which pro-independence groups declared would further marginalise the indigenous Kanaks.

A nationwide overnight curfew has repeatedly been extended, along with a ban on firearms and other weapons. Some 3,700 French gendarmes, riot squads, GIGN paramilitary units and anti-terrorist officers have been mobilised. More than 800 buildings and businesses have been looted and burnt down.

According to the UN rapporteurs there have been 2,235 arrests, including hundreds of arbitrary arrests and detentions, and more than 500 victims of enforced disappearance. Several pro-independence leaders charged with instigating civil unrest remain in jail in mainland France.

The death toll was raised to eleven—nine Kanaks and two gendarmes—on August 15 when a 43-year-old Kanak man was shot in the head and killed, and another critically wounded, by the French gendarmerie amid clashes with activists near the small mining town of Thio on the main island of Grande Terre.

Islands Business correspondent Nic Maclellan posted fresh details of the aggressive French military crackdown on X/Twitter on August 15. He noted that on May 13, the first night of riots, there were 7 gendarmerie units in the territory, each with about 70 officers. Today there are 27 mobile units, backed by 16 Centaure armoured cars and helicopters, engaged in what their commander Colonel Cédric Aranda described as a “war of attrition.”

Aranda told media outlet NC La 1ère: “We are facing an opponent who is hyper mobile, hyper aggressive, who is shooting at us with live ammunition, without us ever being able to locate and identify them. In Saint-Louis [near Nouméa], we are truly in a form of guerrilla warfare, and their mode of action is that of a combatant.” Over 400 officers have been injured.

In other words, France's brutal colonial war of occupation is encountering fierce resistance. According to Aranda, some French military units have previously deployed to

Afghanistan, Kosovo, Côte d'Ivoire or the Indian Ocean dependency of Mayotte. In Mayotte, he declared, “there is the same level of violence from the adversary, but there were no guns. This is the big difference.”

In another significant admission, Aranda revealed: “We'd seen this anger against government institutions during demonstrations like the *gilets jaunes* [yellow vests] or the riots in the suburbs [of Paris]. But here, we are at very intense levels.”

The leaders of the four-party pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) have consistently sought to wind down protest activity and turn hostility to the French crackdown into safe, parliamentary channels.

After a meeting involving pro- and anti-independence MPs with Macron in Paris last month, newly elected National Assembly representative Emmanuel Tjibaou of Union Calédonienne, part of the FLNKS, declared “we have to break the institutional impasse, the deadlock that has occurred over the crisis that affects everyone, whether we are pro- or anti-independence.” All-party talks are due to resume in September.

The FLNKS has meanwhile announced it will hold a crisis congress before the end of this month “to debate the way forward and resolve internal differences over structure, leadership and future talks on political status.”

The rebellion has brought a substantial section of Kanak youth and supporters into direct conflict not only with French colonial oppression, but with the territory's ruling elite, including the pro-independence government and the privileged layer represented by the FLNKS.

Despite their posturing, all the establishment factions are seeking a way to impose their class solution to the crisis. Whatever the outcome, nothing will be done to alleviate the underlying social crisis that is fueling the ongoing rebellion.



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