

# Pacific leaders' fact-finding mission in New Caledonia

John Braddock  
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Following repeated delays, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) last week sent a “strictly observational” mission to New Caledonia to meet with local government, business, political and “community” leaders. The three-day visit was ostensibly to gather information “from all sides” about the ongoing social and political turmoil in the French colony.

The “troika plus” mission was led by Forum Chair Hu’akavameiliku Siaso Sovaleni, the Prime Minister of Tonga, joined by Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown, Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, Solomon Islands Minister for Foreign Affairs Peter-Shanel Agovaka and supported by PIF Secretary General Baron Waqa.

New Caledonia’s pro-independence President Louis Mapou had requested the mission in response to France’s police-military crackdown on unrest that began in May. Mapou emphasised the group was not there to “interfere,” but because “a member of their [the PIF] family is in difficulty” and “to contribute to the de-escalation of conflict.”

Widespread rioting, mainly by alienated indigenous Kanak youth, has so far resulted in 13 deaths—most of them caused by police violence—and an estimated €2.2 billion in damage, full or partial destruction of some 800 businesses, and nearly 20,000 job losses. The economy has virtually collapsed.

Some 7,000 French security personnel with armoured vehicles remain deployed to impose “republican order” in the territory by quelling unrest. Oppressive measures such as nightly curfews remain in place.

In July France’s ambassador to the Pacific, Véronique Roger-Lacan, rejected as “impossible” suggestions that the PIF, the Pacific’s principal leadership body, could “mediate” between French authorities and pro-independence parties, because New Caledonia remains part of France.

The ongoing crisis was a key agenda item at the PIF summit in Tonga in August. According to then PIF chair Brown, the mission was required to “try to reduce the incidence of violence” and to appeal for talks between the different sides. Mapou emphasised that the unfolding events were “hard, of an extreme gravity and in a certain way are

contributing to the region’s instability.”

The mission went ahead with the permission of French President Emmanuel Macron, who assented on August 10. But it was repeatedly postponed due to “differences” between France and New Caledonia’s local government over its status. The then pro-independence Congress President Roch Wamytan accused France of dictating the purpose of the mission, describing it as “an unacceptable form of humiliation.”

The PIF has not yet released an official statement on the mission. *Islands Business* journalist Nic Maclellan told RNZ Pacific that a main feature of discussions, held with “a diverse range of people,” was the economic crisis. There is, he reported, “great anxiety” about what economic support France will provide as the government imposes austerity measures in mainland France. New Caledonia’s Congress has put forward a recovery proposal of more than €4 billion over the next five years.

According to Maclellan, during the discussion with the Kanak Customary Senate there was much talk “about [Pacific] family.” PIF leader Hu’akavameiliku was, however, evasive about the issue of independence, telling the media: “There are various models in the Pacific. ... We are not the ones who will tell [New Caledonia] what is working and what is not. We respect their sovereignty.”

Tuvalu MP Simon Kofe declared: “My position is for independence, we need to continue to support the decolonisation of the Pacific.” Fiji’s Rabuka cautioned the pro-independence parties to be “very, very reasonable” in their requests to Paris. He told RNZ Pacific that he had said to the Kanak movement: “Look, don’t slap the hand that has fed you. So have a good disassociation arrangement when you become independent, make sure you part as friends.”

In fact, a deepening social crisis is at the heart of the uprising. A leader from the Protestant Church of Kanaky New Caledonia, Billy Wetewea, said that the indigenous population is battling inequities in education, employment and health. “The destruction that the youth have made since May, was a kind of expression of the frustration towards all

of these social injustices,” he explained.

The Pacific governments, led by Australia and New Zealand, are not concerned about the brutal conditions imposed on New Caledonia’s oppressed masses by its French colonial overlord. They are nervous that if France cannot bring the situation under control, the unrest in New Caledonia, following riots in Papua New Guinea in January, could spark similar rebellions across the impoverished region, where living standards are being ground down by inflation.

In preparation for looming interventions, Pacific leaders have backed a sweeping Pacific Policing Initiative, under pressure from Australia, despite concerns that it will escalate the confrontation with China in the region. Multi-country police units, with up to 200 officers, trained and led by the Australian Federal Police, are being established. The first saw its initial 40-strong deployment at last month’s CHOGM summit in Samoa.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Rabuka—a former Fiji military coup leader—said the Pacific Policing Support Group could be deployed to New Caledonia as a “peacekeeping force,” modelled on Australia’s Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI). From 2003–2017, Canberra imposed a neo-colonial occupation in Honiara, taking control of key aspects of the impoverished country’s administration, including police, legal system, prisons and finance ministry.

Roger-Lacan told the ABC she doubted French authorities would see the need for Pacific police to be deployed to New Caledonia. “Security is the exclusive competence of the French State,” she said, claiming: “Stability has been brought back by the French state therefore this does not appear to be an issue now.”

In fact, the UN Human Rights Committee last month sharply criticized France over the death toll in New Caledonia and its “cold shower” approach to decolonization. “The means used and the intensity of their response and the gravity of the violence reported, as well as the amount of dead and wounded, are particularly alarming,” Jose Santo Pais, assistant prosecutor general of the Portuguese Constitutional Court said on the committee’s behalf.

French delegates at the Geneva hearing flatly defended the country’s actions and rejected the jurisdiction of the UN decolonization process, saying Paris “no longer has any international obligations” since three referenda on independence had seen majority votes to remain with France. The final plebiscite in December 2021 was boycotted by the independence movement.

French Prime Minister Michel Barnier last month abandoned the contentious constitutional voting reform which triggered the colony’s violent unrest in May. Paris’s

decision was intended to buy time to engage the factions of the territory’s political establishment, including the pro-independence parties, to negotiate a way to still meet the requirements of French imperialism.

The permission given for the PIF mission was bound up with this agenda. It was preceded a week earlier by a visit to Nouméa by French Overseas Minister François-Noël Buffet for discussions with New Caledonia’s “key players.” At the end of his visit Buffet announced: “The time has come to return to dialogue, discussion, exchange, after the terrible (events) New Caledonia has been through.”

One pro-independence Union Calédonienne leader, Pierre-Chanel Tutugoro, said the talks with the minister, in an “open-minded” atmosphere, seemed to confirm that there was a “decolonisation process” underway. “So, on that basis, this is what we’re aiming for, what we’ll put on the table: full independence with or without partnership with France,” he told reporters. “All the options will be on the table.”

Another French mediation and “concertation” delegation, headed by the Presidents of both French Houses of Parliament, Gérard Larcher (Senate) and Yaël Braun-Pivet (National Assembly) is due in Nouméa this month. Macron is likely to summon New Caledonia’s political leaders to Paris before the end of this year.

Any deals reached by the political elites in Paris and Nouméa will do nothing to resolve the fundamental issues behind the unrest—poverty, social inequality, unemployment and social desperation. The rebellion has brought a substantial section of Kanak youth into conflict, not only with French colonial oppression, but with the territory’s establishment, which includes the local government and the official pro-independence movement.

Moreover, the bourgeois program of national “independence” is a political dead-end, especially amid the escalating US-led drive to war in the Pacific and global capitalist austerity measures. None of the fragile, impoverished Pacific countries is fully independent, nor can they be. All rely heavily on aid from the imperialist powers and are subject to routine interference from Australia, New Zealand, the US and France.



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