

# French overseas minister returns for talks in New Caledonia amid ongoing crisis

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France's Overseas Minister Manuel Valls returned to New Caledonia this week for four days of talks on the French Pacific territory's future. Valls previously visited the capital Nouméa between February 22 and March 1 to convene multi-party discussions, ostensibly to initiate a new agreement on the colony's political status, following months of widespread civil unrest by indigenous Kanak youth.

That meeting involved representatives of all the colony's establishment parties, including pro-France "Loyalists" and factions of the pro-independence movement. That had not happened since 2021 following three referenda on self-determination, the last of which was boycotted by the Kanak community.

The participants insisted that the initial round of talks were only "discussions," not formal negotiations. Valls published a "synthesis paper" summing up the pro-France and pro-independence camps' opposed views, which was put forward as a working basis for the more advanced talks.

With the opposing camps holding, for now, entrenched positions, Valls, a former prime minister during the Hollande Socialist Party presidency, has adopted a superficially conciliatory approach. Interviewed by *Le Monde* ahead of his first visit, he spoke about the provisions of the 1988 "power sharing" Nouméa Accord, noting the Accord's reference to eventual "full and complete sovereignty" and decolonisation. Valls' statement provoked hostile protests from the Loyalist factions on his previous arrival.

In a statement before the latest meeting, Valls said the talks had "a clear objective: delineate the fresh horizons of New Caledonia and map out the contours of a shared future after clarifying everyone's expectations, without any taboos or detours."

The statement also affirmed President Emmanuel Macron's priority for France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, declaring: "Our exchanges concerning New Caledonia's competencies in international relations were marked by a shared commitment: advancing New Caledonia's interests while ensuring France's strategic security." Valls warned

that "any actions or alliances that harm France's strategic interests, particularly those that side with foreign powers seeking to weaken us, will not be tolerated."

France, determined to ensure its position as an Indo-Pacific power amid escalating US-led preparations for war against China, will not relinquish its hold over the strategically vital territory. New Caledonia is home to 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 defence industry.

In an interview with French media outlets in March, Valls said the situation in New Caledonia was not yet "appeased" and that a comprehensive agreement on the territory's future was still remote. "Even though we managed to get all political forces to speak to each other again, we are still far from an agreement. One has to understand the fear all of our compatriots over there, and especially those of European origin, have gone through. And to understand also the Kanaks' aspiration to emancipation and decolonization," he added.

The latest talks, held behind closed doors at the French High Commission, reportedly centred on the definition of New Caledonia's future links with France, the possible transfer of powers from Paris, New Caledonian citizenship, and the related question of who is eligible to vote in local elections.

New Caledonia's status remains to be determined. Options include "shared sovereignty," "full independence" or a "free association," similar to New Zealand's neo-colonial arrangement with its so-called "Realm" countries, the Cook Islands and Niue.

New Caledonia's main pro-independence organisation, the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) issued a blunt statement condemning any move to open up the local electoral roll to recent arrivals from France. The issue triggered the uprising last May, which continued for months in the face of brutal police-military suppression by the French state.

Opposing the granting of votes to post-1998 immigrants,

the FLNKS declared it “rejects the principle of mass naturalisation, which would weaken the emancipation project derived from the Nouméa Accord, by allowing recent residents to influence the political future of New Caledonia. In a process of decolonisation, citizenship is not built on residence or taxation alone. It is based on history, belonging, and mutual respect.”

Departing Nouméa on Tuesday, Valls told the media that “all parties of the political landscape, both pro-France and pro-independence, were once again part of the series of round tables.” An official document, which remains confidential, has been tabled for “a third sequence” of discussions beginning on 29 April.

What the talks will not address, let alone resolve, is the deep economic and social crisis hitting the colony, and in particular the impoverished working class and youth. The issues behind the unrest including poverty, social inequality, unemployment and social desperation remain. The rebellion brought a substantial section of Kanak youth into conflict, not only with French colonial oppression, but with the territory’s political establishment, including the local government and the FLNKS.

January saw a sharp shift to the right by the local ruling elite. Following the territorial government’s collapse on Christmas Eve, the new cabinet installed anti-independence loyalist Alcide Ponga, the first Kanak to lead the pro-France Le Rassemblement party, as its new president. Ponga replaced Louis Mapou of the pro-independence Parti de Libération Kanak (Palika), who bitterly declared; “It’s a dirty political blow to the country.”

Congress last month adopted an austerity budget. With businesses failing and thousands unemployed, the government is cutting public services. A spokesman for the pro-independence Union Calédonienne (UC), Pierre-Chanel Tutugoro, denounced the budget as an “anti-Kanak, anti-islander budget.”

In fact, the austerity measures are an attack against the entire working class, including workers in France and internationally, who are being made to pay for the worsening global economic crisis. The crisis in the colony has been exacerbated by the months of violence, including the brutal police-military crackdown, which resulted in 14 deaths and an estimated €2.2 billion in damages.

Nearly a year since the unrest started, unemployment remains high. One in five workers has lost all or part of their income and more than half of the 11,000 people who lost their jobs after last May were still unemployed at the start of this year.

University of New Caledonia economist Séverine Blaise told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation the economic situation was “catastrophic.” She said the local government

should focus on strengthening social security for people struggling to make a living, and invest in sectors that might promote economic development, such as agriculture. This is a forlorn hope.

Migration figures earlier this year showed a net 10,700 people, mainly French nationals, departed the territory in 2024, a dramatic population decline for the territory of just 270,000. A shortage of doctors and nurses has left health services on the verge of collapse. About 20 percent of the 1,000 locally registered doctors have left, according to the French Medical Association of New Caledonia. A similar shortage of surgical nurses has forced Nouméa’s hospital to close departments and stop some surgeries.

The nickel industry, which in the past accounted for about 20 percent of GDP and 90 percent of exports, is in crisis. It was already in decline before the uprising due to global competition from suppliers in China and Indonesia. Since then, exports have dropped and two of the main smelters have been idled.

One of these is Koniambo Nickel SAS (KNS) owned by Swiss mining giant Glencore in a joint venture with Kanak-owned Société Minière du Sud Pacifique SA (SMSP). Last year Glencore announced it would suspend production and sell its stake, leaving 1,000 workers jobless.

Koniambo was a product of the “economic rebalancing” agenda of the Nouméa Accord, established to provide business opportunities for a privileged Kanak layer. Its unviability is testament to the fraudulent promise of Kanak “independence.”

Simmering tensions could erupt again at any time. Last month, in an incident outside a Nouméa nightclub, up to 400 youths were involved in a public brawl. Law enforcement units were called and declared they found themselves in “a dangerous situation” confronted with “hostile” individuals and used teargas and stun-balls.

The French High Commissioner’s chief of staff Anaïs Aït Mansour told reporters the reintroduction of restrictive measures used under last year’s “insurrectional situation” would again be “under consideration.”



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