

# New report documents France's human rights abuses during New Caledonia unrest

John Braddock  
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France's human rights body, the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (La Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme, CNCDH) last month published a damning report on the actions of French security forces and judiciary during the 2024 civil unrest in New Caledonia.

The 28-page report alleges that actions by French authorities against the indigenous Kanak people were systemic, involving "violent, often disproportionate repression." It also condemned the judiciary for violating fundamental human rights and international obligations, and slammed the prison system for the "inhuman" treatment of illegally arrested Kanak prisoners.

The seven-months unrest by alienated Kanak youth saw the deployment of 6,000 French police and gendarmes in the Pacific colony, which has a population of just 260,000. There were 15 deaths, most from shootings by the security forces, hundreds were injured, 2,528 individuals detained and more than 500 sentenced. Damage to property was estimated at €2.2 billion.

The unrest was sparked by French President Emmanuel Macron's proposal to "unlock" the electoral rolls for New Caledonia's provincial assemblies and Congress, adding thousands of recently arrived French voters, further diluting the political influence of the indigenous Kanak population.

The CNCDH notes the profound levels of social inequality and racial discrimination that fuelled the uprising, with 32.5 percent of Kanaks living below the poverty line (compared with 9 percent for the rest of the population). Only 8 percent of Kanaks have access to higher education, compared with 54 percent of Europeans. While Kanaks are 43 percent of New Caledonia's population, they are 90-95 percent of the prison population.

In an article on the report, *Islands Business* correspondent Nic Maclellan wrote that French authorities

had seriously underestimated the strength of opposition to Macron's manoeuvre. France's high commissioner Louis Le Franc arrogantly declared that that "the independence movement, just like the (pro-France) Loyalists, are no longer able to mobilise as they did before." Neither side, he boasted, could gather more than "a few hundred people" over the issue.

But, following thousands-strong protests both for and against Macron's move, riots erupted on May 13, 2024 across the capital, Nouméa, and nearby townships. Shops and businesses were torched and damaged while protesters established roadblocks, including on the road to the international airport.

The rioting exploded outside the control of the pro-independence leadership, which is largely integrated into the political establishment. The rebellion deepened in defiance of the security crackdown and pressure by Macron on New Caledonia's political establishment, including its pro-independence wing, to bring it to heel.

Paris deployed 3,000 gendarmes and police, supported by riot squads from the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité, officers of the Anti-Terrorist Sub-Directorate, and 150 elite GIGN paramilitary "counter-terrorism" soldiers. The deployments recalled the infamous 1988 Ouvéa massacre in which 300 GIGN troops were despatched to end a siege on the island, in which 21 Kanaks and 2 policemen were killed and acts of torture were committed.

On May 15, four people were killed by gunfire, including a French gendarme. In response the GIGN forces mobilised against independence activists in Kanak strongholds. Security forces terrorised communities, established roadblocks, restricted access to goods and carried out degrading searches.

By September, 6,000 security personnel had been deployed, equipped with military weapons, vehicles and helicopters.

On September 19, two men were killed in a confrontation between the gendarmerie and Kanak rebels in the village of Saint Louis, a centre of resistance near Nouméa. None of the French military, police or gendarmes has been charged over Kanak deaths.

In October, a UN Human Rights Committee sharply criticized France over the death toll and its “cold shower” approach to decolonization, declaring “the gravity of the violence reported, as well as the amount of dead and wounded, are particularly alarming.” French delegates at the Geneva hearing defended Paris’ actions.

The CNCDH points to “violent, sometimes deadly, repression by the security forces, particularly in the Southern Province and more specifically against the Kanak people.” There were reports of “severe physical violence, including against minors” and destruction of property during mass arrests. In one case, police reportedly fired on fleeing civilians from a helicopter.

In his article, Maclellan draws parallels with the police attacks on the Yellow Vests anti-austerity protests in France from 2018-20. He notes that certain restrictions governing the use of GML2L tear gas and flash-bang grenades were removed in New Caledonia so that they could be thrown by hand, “leading to their being tossed into houses and enclosed spaces.”

The CNCDH states that Nouméa’s already overcrowded prison, Camp Est, experienced a “massive influx of new detainees” awaiting trial. “In December 2024, it held 596 people in facilities designed for 390, and 173 people slept on mattresses placed directly on the floor. Some prisoners were crammed three, four, or five to a cell in shipping containers converted into makeshift cells.”

The “climate of extreme tension” created by these inhumane conditions led to riots, including a “particularly violent” night on May 14, 2024, in which one prisoner died. “According to 13 fellow inmates, he succumbed to blows from security forces. A judicial investigation is underway,” the report states.

Almost all those imprisoned at Camp Est were Kanaks. Meanwhile, pro-France armed militias, who have been accused of beatings, shootings and the murder of Kanak protesters, have not faced any legal consequences. The CNCDH heard that only allegations of violence by Kanaks would “lead to prosecution, while other acts (considered ‘neighborhood watch’) were tolerated or even justified in the name of legitimate self-defense.”

In June 2024, pro-independence leader Christian Téin and six other Kanak activists were flown to France on

military aircraft and held in solitary confinement for pre-trial detention. The CNCDH criticises this violation of the rights of legal defence, including the imposition of secrecy, separation from families, lack of proper clothing, and no return tickets upon release.

The CNCDH notes that measures adopted in 2025 targeting Kanaks in the Southern Province are widely “perceived as acts of collective retaliation” for the 2024 uprising. These include cuts to medical assistance, restricted access to public housing and education grants, and “refusals to enroll children in school in certain municipalities.”

The report calls on French authorities to address “systemic discrimination and inequalities suffered by the Kanak population”; “resolve the problems of prison overcrowding” and ensure “independent investigations into allegations involving law enforcement during the events of 2024 (excessive use of force, ill-treatment, etc.)”

Any changes will be purely cosmetic. The recommendations will not make an iota of difference to the acute social misery and alienation at the root of the uprising—or to the French ruling elite’s determination to maintain what Macron has termed “Republican order” in its colony. France’s neo-colonial grip on the islands has been sustained for over 170 years by brute force, including a decade of civil war in the 1980s.

Thousands of police and gendarmes continue to effectively occupy New Caledonia, with others on standby to be deployed in the event of unrest.

France’s handling of New Caledonia is inseparable from the imperialist militarisation of the Indo-Pacific. Macron’s drive to lock New Caledonia into a revised constitutional status—the Élysée Oudinot iteration of earlier Bougival and Nouméa arrangements—aims to preserve French control over the colony and defend French imperialist interests in the Pacific more broadly.



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