

# New Caledonia independence activists deported to prisons in France

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Seven New Caledonia pro-independence activists arrested during an early morning raid in Nouméa on June 19 were indicted last Saturday and, without warning, flown to mainland France to be held in custody pending trial.

In all, eleven members of the CCAT (Field Action Coordination Committee), alleged to be the main organising group behind the past month's riots, face charges ranging from organised destruction of goods and property to incitement of murder or attempted murder of police.

The raid, which included the headquarters of Union Calédonienne (UC), the colony's largest pro-independence party, was a provocation by the French state. It occurred just two weeks out from the first round of elections for the French National Assembly on June 30, called by President Emmanuel Macron. The snap election is being conducted amid a sharp rightward shift by the French ruling elites following large gains for far-right parties in the European Parliamentary elections.

New Caledonia's Public Prosecutor Yves Dupas said the indictments followed a decision made by one of two judges dedicated to the case. The transfer to France was organised "during the night by means of a plane specially chartered for the mission," he said. The prisoners were dispatched on the pre-arranged flight in the early hours of Sunday.

The seven Kanak activists were deported, Dupas declared "due to the sensitivity of the procedure and in order to allow the investigations to continue in a calm manner, free of any pressure." In other words, they are placed in a hostile environment, isolated from each other and their support base and at arm's length from legal advice. A frame-up cannot be ruled out.

Among those indicted is Christian Tein, the main leader of CCAT, who was sent to a jail in Mulhouse in the north-east of France. Others include Brenda Wanabo-Ipeze, CCAT's communications officer, in jail in Dijon in the south-east and Frédérique Muliava, chief of staff of New Caledonia's Congress President Roch Wamytan (a major figure in UC), jailed in Riom near central France.

Others indicted but not yet transferred are Guillaume

Vama and Joël Tjibaou, son of pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou, who signed the Matignon "peace" agreement in 1988 and was assassinated a year later by "hardline" members of the pro-independence movement.

RNZ Pacific reported that the deportations were met with widespread shock and outrage. Tein's lawyer Pierre Ortet said he was "stupefied" that his client was being sent to France, 17,000 kilometers away, accusing magistrates of "answering to purely political considerations." Lawyer Christelle Affoue said: "With our clients in mainland France and us here, it will be very complicated to organise a proper defense."

Thomas Gruet, Wanabo-Ipeze's lawyer, added: "My client would never have imagined ending up here. She is extremely shocked because, in her view, this is just about activism." Gruet said, "At no time was imprisonment in France mentioned during the proceedings. This was announced to my client during deliberations. It was too late to challenge." Wanabo had "spent the whole of her first night (of indictment) handcuffed," he said, and leaves three children behind in Nouméa.

Another lawyer, Stéphane Bonomo, observed: "If this was about making new martyrs of the pro-independence cause, then there would not have been a better way to do it." UC president Daniel Goa described the transfer as a "political deportation." "The independence of the judiciary is a farce in New Caledonia," he declared and denounced "France's colonial, repressive, and retrograde policy against the Kanak people."

The activists are accused of being the "order-givers" within CCAT that was set up last year by UC, one of four parties of the FLNKS alliance. CCAT organised a series of marches and protests, mainly peaceful, to oppose plans by the French government to change eligibility rules for local elections, which the pro-independence movement said would further marginalise indigenous Kanak population votes.

Rioting erupted on May 13, mainly involving disaffected indigenous Kanak youth, after the French National

Assembly voted to proceed with the constitutional change. Nine people have been killed and the capital Nouméa and surrounding districts devastated. Hundreds have been injured and 1,200 arrested, some flown out to France due to overcrowding in the Nouméa prison. Damage of €1 billion is estimated with up to 500 businesses and stores looted or destroyed by arson.

CCAT has consistently denied responsibility for the civil unrest. While under house arrest Tein accepted an invitation to meet with Macron during the latter's Nouméa visit on May 23. As Macron demanded the pro-independence leaders use their influence to have roadblocks dismantled, Tein took to social media calling for the easing of security measures so he could speak to militants.

Despite a massive police-military operation and pressure wielded by Macron, the rebellion has not been brought under control. The FLNKS admitted that it failed to persuade protesters to remove roadblocks because the young activists were not convinced Macron would drop the electoral reform. Macron announced on June 12 he had "suspended," but not withdrawn, the contentious amendment.

The deportations have provoked a new wave of unrest and clashes. The *Guardian* cited French High Commissioner Louis Le Franc who alleged they began on Sunday night, including fires at the Koumac town hall, the premises of the municipal police in Dumbéa, an attack on a gendarmerie in Maré, and alleged acts of "destruction and vandalism" in different neighbourhoods of Nouméa. Broadcaster Nouvelle-Calédonie la 1ère also reported unrest in the neighbourhoods of Vallée-du-Tir, Magenta and Tuband.

Barricades have again been erected across the main island. *Islands Business* correspondent Nic Maclellan posted on X/Twitter a scene of a protest in Poya, on the border of the Northern and Southern Provinces. Until now protests had been centred in Noumea and surrounding towns in the south, but they are spreading beyond the capital. On the outer island of Lifou the airstrip was damaged, and all Air Calédonie flights cancelled.

Solidarity Kanaky, a pro-independence network in France, organised an emergency protest outside the Ministry of Justice in Paris on Sunday opposing the deportations and calling for the prisoners to be freed. The organisation has denounced the "criminalisation of CCAT" and the "abusive arrests, which once again are designed to meet the expectations of the most radical [pro-French] 'loyalists.'"

There is no doubt the prison transfer was organised at the highest levels of the French state, including by Macron. Paris has turned the colony of just 270,000 people into an armed camp with over 3,700 security personnel, supported by armoured riot control vehicles, helicopters and other heavy equipment. Hundreds of military personnel patrol the

streets and an 8.00 p.m.–6.00 a.m. curfew is being maintained.

Despite the authorities seeking to pin the blame on a handful of CCAT leaders, the riots erupted from below and remain outside the control of the official "independence" parties. The unrest expresses deepening social discontent, particularly among unemployed and alienated Kanak youth who see no future amid grinding inequality and an escalating economic crisis in the prevailing set-up. Maclellan posted on X/Twitter that they "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."

Amid the election campaign in France, the far-right Rassemblement National is backing Macron's reforms, the "restoration of order" and continued French colonial domination of New Caledonia.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of France Unbowed (LFI), part of the New Popular Front, said Tein's prison transfer was "an alienation of his rights and a gross and dramatic political mistake." He has accused Macron of being responsible for the civil unrest in the territory. The Front's joint election statement calls for the New Caledonia reforms to be abandoned as a "gesture of appeasement" and to return to "the path of dialogue and a search for consensus."

This is a fraud. Whatever the outcome of the election, French imperialism is not about to cede control over the strategically significant territory with its major military base and reserves of nickel. All factions of the political establishment are preparing intensified war on the working class at home and in its colonies, and war abroad.



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