

Macron agrees to Pacific leaders' fact-finding mission to New Caledonia

John Braddock
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After several weeks of delay, French President Emmanuel Macron has given the go-ahead for a high-level Pacific fact-finding mission to New Caledonia. It was requested by leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), ostensibly to gather information about the ongoing social and political turmoil in the French colony.

The confirmation came as Forum foreign ministers met last week in Suva, Fiji, ahead of the 53rd PIF Leaders Summit on Tonga at the end of August. The PIF secretariat wrote to Macron last month, requesting a visit by a Forum Ministerial Committee to Nouméa to gather information “from all sides” involved in the crisis.

The 18-member PIF is the Pacific's major regional leadership body. The delegation to Nouméa will comprise PIF chair and Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown, Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Menele.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters indicated prior to the announcement from Paris that New Zealand wished to “play a role,” adding that he expects “over time there will be more than one delegation” sent to New Caledonia.

France's ambassador to the Pacific, Véronique Roger-Lacan, told RNZ Pacific on Friday that Paris “is welcoming” the fact-finding mission which will report back to the PIF summit. She had previously emphasised that while France “is always open for dialogue,” New Caledonia was French territory and “it is the State which decides on who enters the French territory and when and how.”

Violent unrest broke out nearly 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.

Amid an ongoing 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. nationwide curfew, 3,700 French security forces are still working on removing roadblocks, mainly in the capital Nouméa and outskirts. The death toll stands at ten: eight civilians and two gendarmes.

More than 800 buildings and businesses are estimated to have been looted and burnt down by rioters. Several pro-independence leaders charged with instigating civil unrest remain in jail in mainland France.

France's High Commissioner Louis Le Franc last week provocatively issued medals to soldiers of the elite GIGN paramilitary force which has been involved in armed clashes with protestors, including the killing of a prominent Kanak rebel on 10 July. The GIGN is notorious for its role in the 1988 massacre of 21 Kanaks who were holding a group of hostages on the island of Ouvéa during civil war conditions.

Roger-Lacan dismissed widespread criticism over France's crackdown, slamming Pacific media for not being “very balanced with their reports.” “We repeat the fact that these riots were conducted by a handful of people who contest democratic, transparent and fair processes, and that the French state has restored security, and is rebuilding and organising the reconstruction [of New Caledonia],” she insisted.

PIF Chair Brown said the task of the high-level “monitoring and dialogue” mission is “to try to reduce the incidence of violence” and to appeal for talks between the different sides.

The various Pacific governments, as well as Australia and New Zealand, are not concerned about the brutal conditions imposed on New Caledonia's oppressed masses. They are undoubtedly nervous, however, that if France cannot bring the situation 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.

New Caledonia and French Polynesia were admitted as members of the PIF in 2016, after lobbying by Paris since 2003 to expand its regional influence. Membership was previously restricted to the nominally independent nations. The move was endorsed by the regional imperialist powers Australia and New Zealand amid escalating geo-strategic rivalries fueled by the US-led preparations for war with China.

Macron's strategy in New Caledonia has been to enforce "Republican order" with the intense police-military crackdown, while demanding the official pro-independence leadership play its part in suppressing the rebellion. Lifting a 12-day state of emergency on May 28, Macron demanded the leaders of the four-party FLNKS (Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste) use their influence to get blockades around the main island dismantled.

Despite the massive security operation and pressure wielded by Macron, the rebellion has still not been brought under control. The FLNKS admitted that it failed to persuade protesters to remove roadblocks because the rebels were not convinced Macron would drop the electoral reform.

The FLNKS is supporting calls for outside intervention to help control the uprising. As a component of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), which includes Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, it was party to a statement calling for a joint United Nations-MSG mission to assess the political situation and "propose solutions."

Supported by PIF Chair Brown, the MSG 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.

While Macron manoeuvres to form a right-wing government in France in defiance of the results of last month's snap election, talks between New Caledonia's pro- and anti-independence parties are set to resume in September. Four New Caledonian MPs, two from each side, met with Macron in Paris late last month calling for "political dialogue" to resume urgently.

RNZ Pacific reported that the group emerged from the meeting with "an apparent show of unity." Newly elected pro-independence representative Emmanuel Tjibaou of Union Calédonienne, a constituent 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." Loyalist Georges Naturelle (Rally-UMP, affiliated with Les Républicains in France) declared the meeting had "presented a model for the resumption of dialogue in Nouméa." The "priority of priorities," he declared, "is to return to order."

The factions of the colony's ruling elite are preparing to come together to reach a settlement, in collaboration with the French state, to impose their class solution to the crisis. The official Kanak movement has been exposed by the uprising that erupted from below and outside their control. The riots have much deeper roots than unresolved frustrations over independence, coming at a time of

escalating economic turmoil and social discontent. Unemployment among youth is 26 percent, mainly affecting young Kanaks.

The crisis is set to intensify. The major nickel plant Koniambo (KNS) recently announced the impending sacking of 1,200 workers after failing to find a buyer. Operations were idled following an announcement in February that its financier, Anglo-Swiss Glencore, wanted out. Some 600 contractors relying on the plant have already lost their jobs.

KNS is jointly owned by Glencore (49 percent) and New Caledonia's Northern Province (51 percent). In a decade of operation it has never made a profit, accumulating a huge €13.5 billion of debt. The plant was established in a 1997 deal brokered by France which, along with the 1998 Nouméa Accord, created a narrow, pro-capitalist political and business elite within the Kanak community.

Now, as global nickel prices tumble, New Caledonia's crucial nickel mining and smelting industry is in turmoil, faced with increasing competition from emerging producers such as Indonesia and China which are manufacturing much cheaper nickel. Two other plants, Prony Resources and Société le Nickel, are facing similar crises, threatening the jobs of a quarter of the territory's workforce.

Miners, processing workers, truck drivers, airport workers and others have repeatedly engaged in militant struggles to defend jobs and conditions. This has brought them into conflict with the entire ruling elite, including the privileged layer represented by the FLNKS. In April clashes erupted between security forces and protesters over the future of the plant. These could well erupt again.



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