

# Trouble in New Caledonia

By Joe Murphy

Editor, Pacific Daily News, Guam

NOUMEA, New Caledonia — "We want our island back!"

Yan Celene Uregei, a dark-skinned Kanaka, said that to me, sitting in his United Liberation Front Office in downtown Noumea.

Uregei, a former schoolteacher, now a member of the Territorial Assembly, represents a new cloud on the horizon of the French Pacific. After more than 100 years of passive, stoic acceptance of the way things were, the natives are finally beginning to get restless.

An intelligent man, about 50, wearing glasses, Uregei didn't look like a revolutionary. But he insisted: "We are the real people of this island."

His most immediate concern was what he saw as a mass migration of French settlers and planters to New Caledonia, following the violence that developed in nearby Vanuatu, formerly the New Hebrides, after the attempted secession of the island of Espiritu Santo. He estimated that 700 to 1,000 French people have come to New Caledonia in recent months, further diluting the political power of the Kanakas, as they call themselves.

New Caledonia, a large, lush, cigar-shaped island, is located about 750 miles northeast of Australia. With 19,750 square kilometers, it is bigger than Hawaii, which has 16,638. New Caledonia is 250 miles long by 30 miles wide. Except for Noumea, one of the most highly urbanized areas in the Pacific, it is largely empty.

NOUMEA IS astounding to a traveler. It isn't like most island cities at all, more like a provincial French capital. It has more than 70,000 people, and blocks and blocks of four- to 14-story office buildings, banks, apartments, hotels, theaters, restaurants and nightclubs. Noumea has freeways, stop lights, thousands of cars, parking meters, elevators, escalators and television.

It is French through and through. There are outdoor cafes, where island people and the French sit around drinking wine, overlooking the lovely Place des Cocotiers (Place of Coconuts). Dozens of Melanesians, some wearing berets, pass the day in the park playing bowls.

Tourism is the major industry in New Caledonia, after nickel of course. Nearly 100,000 visitors a year find their way here to enjoy the beaches, lagoons and the French restaurants. The entire island is surrounded by a reef, rich in marine life, allowing great wind surfing, swimming and boating in the lagoons.

About half of the tourists are Australian, with other large numbers coming from Japan, New Zealand and France. Last year only about

2,000 Americans stopped here to enjoy this Hawaii with escargot, or this Paris with palm trees.

There are real attractions, too, from the Casino Royal, where you can play blackjack, or chemin de fer, to a marvelous aquarium, one of the best in the Pacific, featuring sharks, rays and huge varieties of brightly colored tropical fish.

MANY COME for the shopping, which is like shopping in Paris. Chic boutiques offer high-fashion designer items.

The unique New Caledonia bird, the cagou, is a star here, too. A cousin to the kiwi, the bird doesn't fly and has a call similar to a barking dog.

Whether the French can keep their South Pacific paradise is another question.

There seems to be pressure building up from the Kanakas, who are mostly outside looking in.

## *The Melanesian natives of New Caledonia are demanding concessions from France.*

The French play the political game differently than do the Americans, say in Guam. All the Kanakas, all the people of New Caledonia, are citizens of France. As such, they vote in the national elections. New Caledonia has its own deputies in the French National Assembly, with full powers. It is considered an integral part of France — unlike Guam, which is just a U.S. territory.

The charge made by Uregei and other Melanesians, that France is exploiting the Kanakas by selling millions of dollars worth of nickel each year, is hard to substantiate because of the difficulty in obtaining statistics. The French do realize large amounts of money from nickel, to be sure, and have done so for more than 100 years. But they also expend a great deal of money in the territory for education, administration, roads, military surveillance and economic development.

To the casual observer, it would appear that the two balance each other out.

THERE IS NO question that the French do run New Caledonia totally, to the near-exclusion of the native Melanesians. New Caledonia, as an overseas territory, has executive control vested in the governor, who is a public official appointed by the government in Paris. The governor is also the high commissioner for France in the Pacific. New Caledo-

nia is the keystone of the French colonies in the Pacific, which also include French Polynesia (Tahiti), and Wallis and Futuna islands.

A 35-member territorial assembly, elected by universal suffrage, does meet to debate and approve the territorial budget submitted by the administration. In addition the assembly may express its desires on policy matters outside its jurisdiction and controlled from Paris. Not only does the assembly have little real power; it is dominated completely by the French in numbers.

The key is in the population mix. This is one of the most polyglot places in the entire Pacific. Out of 140,000 people now living in the territory, about 60,000 are Melanesian. There are also about 45,000 French, many second- or third-generation, with strong ties to the tricolor. The swing vote may be the outsiders, with as many as 10,000 Tahitians, another 10,000 Wallisians, and significant numbers of Indonesians, Vietnamese and even Algerians.

The Kanakas, with larger families, with more children under voting age, and mostly uneducated, living in rural areas, working in subsistence farming, aren't able to control the assembly. In practice the heavy French voting population in Noumea controls the assembly.

THE ECONOMIC SITUATION of the Kanakas is by no means a prosperous one. Of the Kanakas who are employed, 65 percent are laborers or house servants, requiring no technical qualifications. Out of 860 executives in the territory, only two are Kanakas. Of 650 supervisors, only seven are Kanakas.

To be fair to the French, it must be pointed out that the lack of opportunity and training for the Kanakas is partly cultural. Despite a considerable effort to train Kanaka workers, those who have learned a trade tend not to work at it. The island people prefer their rural life style. They don't like time clocks and the fast pace of Noumea.

The French say the islanders don't want to work; the islanders complain that they get all the dirty, low-paying jobs. This schism is bound to lead to political trouble someplace down the road.

The United Liberation Front, headed by Uregei, has been to the United Nations, appearing before the decolonization commission. The Kanaka message is simple: "The Kanaka people are the only legitimate people of New Caledonia, the legitimate owners of New Caledonia, of all Kanak lands and natural resources."

The newly won independence of nearby Vanuatu has put fire into the



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Kanakas here. There is even talk of setting up a government in exile in Port Vila.

THE FRENCH are having trouble trying to maintain the status quo. Last year President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing visited Noumea. He criticized European refusal to face the problems of Melanesian unrest, promising that France would stay but only if wanted.

At the same time, the French are spending millions annually in economic development, including a Kanaka land resettlement program involving cattle breeding, coffee, orchards, forestry and fisheries.

But Uregei, in our interview, accused the French of exploiting the island for its nickel, claiming that "We own 95 percent of the nickel resources and have received not a cent from them."

The most important problem, he said, is land. "The land has been polluted and stolen by the white people. Now the Melanesian is being pushed out of his land to reserves. Even worse, he said, "even the reserves are not owned by the people, but by the government, a government over which we have no control."

In the assembly, Uregei said, only 14 members are Kanakas out of 35, leaving power in the hands of those he calls "foreigners." The main reason, he said, is that from 1853, when the French took over, until 1953, "secondary schools were forbidden for Melanesians."

This means that few Melanesians are educated in political or economic matters. Only one Kanaka, he said, has become a doctor.

UREGEI IS ALSO concerned about a plan he said was being prepared by the minister of territories which shows a population of 300,000 for New Caledonia, indicating that the French are preparing to send more settlers and refugees to the island.

He was preparing for the first Independence Front conference ever held, in conjunction with the Vanuatu Party. The front's only weapons until now have been spray-painting of slogans on the walls of government buildings, and an occasional trip to the United Nations. It is now striving for Melanesian unity and hopes to get help from Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu and Fiji.

It is evident that the nagging question of Kanaka power is not going to go away easily in New Caledonia. The French, for all their development here, may be in for difficult years unless they can find a way to bring the Kanakas into the power elite of the island.



A Melanesian of New Caledonia.





# Trouble in New Caledonia

By Peter Hastings

Sydney Morning Herald

SYDNEY, Australia — New Caledonia, cigar-shaped and rugged, and its more luxuriant offshore islands, reminded its discoverer, Captain Cook, of parts of Scotland (which the Romans knew as Caledonia). Its capital, Noumea, is a Southwest Pacific tourist haunt, slightly off the beaten track. Its somewhat oppressive air of French provincialism is relieved by pleasant scenery and some splendid restaurants. It is the very heart of the French Pacific — and the center of fast-brewing trouble.

New Caledonia, about 750 miles east of Australia, is highly polyglot. There are 55,000 mainly village-dwelling indigenous Melanesians who call themselves Kanaks, a pidgin word that spread to Melanesia from Australia's cane fields in the 19th century but originated in Hawaii. There are 50,000 Europeans —

*The Melanesian natives of New Caledonia are expressing interest in independence from France.*

mainly French, about one-third of whom work in, or on behalf of, the French administration or for the nickel industry. (New Caledonia is the world's second-largest producer of the highly strategic mineral; nickel is a lucrative source of employment and income.)

The other inhabitants are mostly second- and third-generation Frenchmen who farm or run tropical cattle ranches. Most have never seen France and may not particularly want to but nevertheless claim it passionately as home. Politically they do not look much beyond local autonomy for New Caledonia within the French Union.

IN ADDITION, there are about 10,000 Wallis Islanders (Polynesians), 7,000 Tahitians, 5,000 Indonesians and 2,000 Vietnamese — the Indonesians and Vietnamese arrived before World War II — as well as handfuls of migrants from such farflung parts of the French empire as Pondicherry, India, Algiers and Madagascar. They work mostly in low-paid urban jobs, and the Melanesians cordially dislike them.

The history of French occupation is one of early repression, bloody colonial mini-wars and economic exploitation. In Paris, there is now new awareness of Kanak grievances — as in the neighboring New Hebrides, these center primarily on compulsory loss of land — and the dangers to French interests of awakening Me-

lanesian nationalism from Papua New Guinea to Fiji.

The Melanesian message put at the United Nations by Kanak nationalists is simple: "The Kanak people are the only legitimate people of New Caledonia, the legitimate owners of New Caledonia, of all Kanak lands and natural resources." The message is increasingly persuasive. It is basically an anti-French sentiment, a provocation for which is the continued French nuclear testing in Mururora, an atoll in eastern French Polynesia, and it is not restricted to New Caledonia. France faces future problems with minority independence movements in nearly all of its Pacific possessions.

TWO WEEKS AGO, French-speaking political parties in the New Hebrides, which is jointly administered by Britain and France, suffered convincing defeat at the hands of the English-speaking Vanuaaku Party, which will now clearly lead the islands to independence next year. Therefore, a Vanuaaku victory statement that an independent New Hebrides would allow the Kanak Liberation Movement to set up a government-in-exile in Port Vila has produced some fairly hysterical French over-reaction both in New Caledonia and the New Hebrides.

New Caledonia is a French overseas territory with its own assembly and administration, which have a fair degree of local autonomy. In the 1977 elections, an amalgam of primarily European political parties

predictably won but the predominantly Melanesian pro-independence parties got 18 percent of the total vote. In this year's elections following the coalition's collapse, another European coalition again won power, but pro-independence parties won 35 percent of the vote. In Melanesian districts, they won more than 60 percent of the vote.

THE FRENCH therefore are finding it hard to maintain the status quo. Over the next 10 years, Paris will spend \$160 million annually in development plans, including a Kanak land resettlement program involving cattle breeding, coffee, orchards, forestry and fisheries. In July, President Valery Giscard d'Estaing visited all French Pacific possessions other than the New Hebrides condominium. In Noumea, he criticized European refusal to face the problems of Melanesian unrest and promised that France would stay, but only, he added, if wanted. While eloquent, his statement may be too late in helping avoid the slowly building Rhodesian-style confrontation between indigenous Melanesian and third-generation white settlers.

If confrontation comes, it will present Australia, in particular, with difficult choices between its friendship with France and the exigent demands of its equally important, tiny and economically dependent neighbors, all of whom will back New Caledonia. Moreover, if France goes, who pays the aid bill?

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