

Report from Paris by Laurent Rosenfeld

Will New Caledonia be lost?

The Soviets, the British, and Qaddafi have combined to destabilize the strategic island colony.

On Nov. 15, as French President François Mitterrand was meeting Libya's Colonel Qaddafi and Greek Prime Minister Papandreou on the island of Crete, the New Caledonian independence movement, FLNKS, was preparing riots to prevent regular local elections from taking place Nov. 18. The movement receives money and guerrilla training from Qaddafi.

New Caledonia is a 300-mile long, 50-mile wide French island in the Coral Sea, 800 nautical miles east of Australia at the latitude of the Tropic of Capricorn. It possesses one-fifth of world reserves of nickel, as well as a significant reserve of other strategic nonferrous minerals such as chrome, manganese, and cobalt. But its strategic significance goes much further, and in this, the interests of France and the United States coincide: New Caledonia is central to immense French maritime territory in the area which is crucial for naval traffic lines, telecommunications, submarine communications, and space applications.

New Caledonia and this entire territory, as Qaddafi's involvement indicates, is now being subject to a Soviet-inspired destabilization.

On election day, only the urban population was able to vote, the rural population being kept away from the polls at gunpoint by FLNKS guerrillas. Overall, only about 50% of the population voted. Over 70% supported the anti-independence RCPR party.

The independence leaders claim that only the "Kanak" (Melanesian natives, representing 42% of the 145,000 inhabitants) had the right to

vote. The so-called "Caldoches" (people of European origins, about 37%) and other non-Kanak populations represent the "colonialist power."

In fact, all opinion polls indicate that even two-thirds of the Kanaks oppose independence.

Rejecting the results, the FLNKS has increased violence. Several policemen have been severely wounded, official buildings sacked, and Jean-Claude Demar, "sub-prefect" (local governor) of the Loyaute archipelago, a group of small islands close to New Caledonia, is now being held by the FLNKS.

Troops have been sent to try to restore order, but the French Socialist government, as just about everywhere else in the world, has appeasement in mind. Paris has already announced it is willing to hold a referendum on autonomy sooner than originally scheduled. It seems that the government is ready to give in to the guerrillas' demands: election of a "constitutional assembly" to write up the questions submitted by referendum to the population; the referendum could be held as soon as 1985.

Will the French government go so far as to forbid the "Caldoches" from voting? Pro-Soviet Interior Minister Pierre Joxe is reported to have stated that "decolonization" was needed in this area. Dick Ukeiwe, the newly elected president of the local government, a Kanak who belongs to the RCPR, accused Mitterrand of wanting to "sell out" New Caledonia.

Four powers are directly involved in the destabilization: Libya, the So-

viet Union, and two countries of the British Commonwealth, Australia and New Zealand. The latter two have long been campaigning against French nuclear tests on the Mururoa atoll in French Polynesia, recently in the context of the Soviet campaign to make the Pacific Ocean a "nuclear free zone"—i.e., Soviet dominated. Australia and New Zealand have assumed this role in Lord Carrington's New Yalta deal: The Western Pacific is to be given to the Soviet sphere of influence.

This campaign now has the support of more than 15 nations of the area, most of them extremely small. This month, the campaign against French nuclear tests won four new supporters: Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.

More directly involved in the destabilization is Libya's Colonel Qaddafi. Two months ago, 17 members of the FLNKS went to Libya for training (see *EIR*, Oct. 30, 1984), and an independence leader stated that the French would now have to contend with people trained in guerrilla warfare. The Libyan help goes further: An AFP release has reported that, "according to well informed sources," Libya has given about \$5 million to the FLNKS.

The same release reported that the Soviet "cargo" ship *Turkmenistan*, full of radar and radio antennas, is now cruising 230 miles off the coast of New Caledonia.

Aiding the independence movement have been the severe economic problems of the island due to the recent collapse in the international price of nickel: In 1983, New Caledonia exported only 42,200 metric tons of this metal, against 118,900 tons in 1976. This collapse was triggered by the Soviets' sudden, massive sales of the metal on international markets.