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PRESS RELEASE

KANAK STRUGGLE FOR SOVEREIGNTY OVER NATURAL RESOURCES MET WITH VIOLENCE BY THE FRENCH STATE

The Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (PCRC) strongly condemns the recent use of violence by the French state in New Caledonia against members of the Rhéébù Nùù Committee, the organization representing Kanak landowners on issues related to the Goro nickel mine, operated by the Canadian mining giant INCO in southern New Caledonia.

Since its inception in 2001, the Rhéébù Nùù Committee had protested against the conditions granted to INCO for the opening of the Goro-Nickel mine, and in particular, the lack of guarantee by INCO on genuine sustainable development and an environmental impact assessment on the potential destruction to the land, sea and air by the mining waste.

While Rhéébù Nùù has asked for nothing more than a negotiated agreement on environmental and social conditions, its questions and claims as the legitimate representative of the Kanak people have so far been ignored by INCO.

“This represents a gross violation of the sovereignty rights of indigenous Kanak to be part of the decision-making process in the sustainable management of their natural resources,” said Ms Ema Tagicakibau, spokesperson for Peace and Disarmament at PCRC.

“Our greatest concern is that the frustrations of the landowners must be addressed in order to avoid the costly parallels of Bougainville’s Panguna copper mine crisis in the 1990s that lasted some ten years and claimed over 10,000 lives,” Ms Tagicakibau added. “The Kanak case has dragged on for some time and is taking its toll on the patience of the landowners, with some resorting to militancy. ”

Frustrated by INCO’s refusal to negotiate, Rhéébù Nùù supporters destroyed 10 million dollars worth of equipment on the Goro-Nickel site and erected a camp blocking the access road to the mining site. On April 18th, the blockade was lifted when the camp was destroyed by a heavy intervention of the French armed forces called in by the French High Commission. Protestors at the camp which included ten women, were arrested.

PCRC reiterates that the situation cannot be resolved by further violence on either side. The first violence was inflicted by the special concessions awarded to INCO, without the free and informed consent of the landowners, or the Customary Senate (Senat Coutumier or Council of Chiefs). These included the free acquisition of land currently valued at 200

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billion CFP (Pacific francs or 2.15 billions US dollars); a tax-free status for the first 15 years and the lack of an Environmental Impact Assessment. The second violence is the stubborn refusal of INCO to recognize or negotiate with the Committee, severely limiting their options.

At a point when peace and security in the region is at stake, PCRC calls on Pacific leaders through the Pacific Islands Forum to invoke relevant principles of the Biketawa Declaration to:

- Urge the French authorities in New Caledonia to take seriously the grievances of the Kanak landowners; and
- Assist in the setting up of genuine negotiations and dialogue with all stakeholders instead of using violence to suppress the landowners' legitimate claims.

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