



**Statement on behalf of the
Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG)**

by

**His Excellency Mr. Max Hufanen Rai
Permanent Representative and Ambassador
of Papua New Guinea to the United Nations**

at the

**Seventy-sixth Session of the
Special Political and Decolonisation Committee**

on

**Agenda Item 63: Implementation of the Declaration on the
Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples**

19 October 2021, New York

“Check against delivery”

Madam Chair, Excellencies and distinguished delegates,

On behalf of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG); a Pacific sub-regional intergovernmental organization comprising Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and my own country, Papua New Guinea, and also the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front¹ of New Caledonia, I am honoured to deliver this statement on Agenda Item 63, and particularly regarding the Non-Self-Governing Territory of New Caledonia.

We congratulate you, Madam Chair, and this Committee's respective Bureau members for the mandate entrusted to you to lead and guide our collective work to its successful conclusion, as scheduled. We welcome the tactful manner you are steering the Committee and wish you well and also pledge our constructive support.

Madam Chair,

May I take this opportunity to also pay special tribute and commendation to my colleague and distinguished Chair of the Special Committee on Decolonisation, Her Excellency Ms. Keisha McGuire, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Grenada, a sister Small Island Developing State, for the sterling stewardship of the work of C-24, over this past 2 years, under the challenging COVID-19 pandemic circumstances.

In this spirit, we join our voices in strong support of the C-24 Report presented earlier to this Committee by the C-24 Rapporteur and also recognize with gratitude the supportive role played by the respective C-24 members and its Bureau as well as the UN Secretariat, particularly the Decolonization Unit.

Madam Chair,

Over the past week we again bore witness to the disheartening episode before this Committee of the petitions from far and wide, including from our Blue Pacific Continent, for the emancipation of colonized peoples and territories. A situation these peoples, from the beginning, never freely chose to be in.

How many more International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism must we continue to pronounce and declare in the General Assembly? This must and cannot be allowed to continue indeterminately. This, we cannot overstate.

¹ The Front de Liberation Nationale et Kanak Socialist (FLNKS).

It is therefore incumbent on all of us, as UN Member States, and not just the members of the Special Committee on Decolonisation, to bring to a successful end the prolonged painful unfinished business of the decolonization agenda in the United Nations.

We respectfully suggest that the evolving discussions in the General Assembly on the Common Agenda ought to also appropriately consider this long outstanding blight on our common humanity.

Madam Chair,

Turning to the Question of New Caledonia, we reaffirm our strong and steadfast resolve, commitment and support for its self-determination and decolonization, in the spirit and letter of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples, the relevant UN General Assembly resolutions and also the Noumea Accord of 5 May 1998.

We have continued to witness with appreciation, particularly over the past decade, the positive developments in New Caledonia's self-determination process, culminating in two highly successful and peaceful self-determination referenda on 4 November 2018 and on 4 October 2020 as well as setting of the next scheduled self-determination referendum on 12 December 2021.

The holding of three self-determination referenda for any of the remaining 17 Non-Self-Governing Territory's, within a four-year period, is unprecedented and an important milestone, particularly in the context of New Caledonia.

It is a clear testimony to the concerted efforts, dialogue and leadership, in a spirit of harmony and mutual respect, particularly from all the stakeholders in New Caledonia and France, as the Administering Power, as well as the supportive work of this Committee and the General Assembly. This must be maintained, going forward.

We also recognize that this is no easy task and that much more work remains to be done.

In order to continue to promote a framework for the peaceful progress of the Territory towards an act of self-determination, in which all options are open and that would safeguard the rights of all sections of the population, this must be based on the principle that it is for the people of New Caledonia to choose how to determine their destiny.

Madam Chair,

It is from this perspective that we would draw this Committee and the General Assembly's attention as well as that of the administering Power, France, to the urgency and the importance of the key issues now surrounding New Caledonia's 12 December 2021 self-determination referendum, particularly with respect to the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Territory.

We note and welcome the ongoing dialogue between the Territory's Government and political parties and the administering Power, through its Minister for French territories, including on the question of whether to convene the next self-determination referendum, as scheduled or defer it. We are, however, concerned with suggestions from the administering Power to hold the self-determination referendum, as scheduled.

We are deeply concerned, like many New Caledonians, that the prevailing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic in New Caledonia, in our considered view, does not present a conducive environment for a fair, just, credible, transparent and peaceful conduct of the self-determination referendum in New Caledonia on 12 December 2021. The integrity and credibility of the referendum process and its outcome is seriously at a higher stake.

We alluded to this in our statement to this Committee last October, where we underscored that as we collectively address the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, we must not forget the impact this virus is also having on the 17 Non-Self-Governing Territories and the need to work closely with the administering Powers of these Territories to ensure that their health and development needs are adequately met.

Madam Chair,

Today, New Caledonia is under a state of health emergency declaration and this will remain in force until 15 November 2021.

Additionally, based on the Government of New Caledonia's press briefing on 27 September 2021 it was reported that more than 6379 COVID-19 cases were recorded. It also reported that nearly 30.5% of the total population has been vaccinated since 6 September 2021, the start of the health crisis affecting the Territory.

We are also saddened to note that so far around 241 New Caledonians have died from COVID-19 and the majority around 60% are Kanaks. We convey our heartfelt sympathies and condolences to those that have passed and to the affected families and the people of the Territory.

We also note that the COVID-19 containment measures include special travel permits, the closure of non-essential businesses, including shops and the closure of public transport. A curfew was introduced from 9:00 pm to 5:00 am from 14 September until 27 September and further extended to 4 October 2021.

Madam Chair,

With less than three months before the self-determination referendum scheduled for 12 December 2021, we note that despite the welcome declining COVID-19 cases in New Caledonia, the fear of the virus has affected the entire population of the Territory. This is given the increasing number of lives lost to the virus, the traumatic experiences regarding the increased number of cases and hospitalizations and the attack on the COVID-19 related health facilities.

It has also disrupted the school calendar and the organisation of end-of-year exams. On the health front, we note that health care personnel are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the health crises. Medical reinforcements have been sent from Metropolitan France to deal with it. The economic situation is also deteriorating on a daily basis and is causing difficulties on all fronts.

We also note that the restrictive measures established by the local Government, includes ban on undertaking Kanak traditional rites and related social events for mourning of the deceased COVID-19 victims has caused serious frustration among Kanak families.

The importance of the recent declaration by the President of the Customary Senate in New Caledonia for a year of mourning for the COVID-19 victims to facilitate proper traditional mourning rites needs to be respected once the COVID-19 situation improves. This may likely impact the conduct of the self-determination referendum and needs to be appropriately addressed to avoid any potential fallout.

Madam Chair,

Today, the people of New Caledonia are seriously concerned about the question of the referendum on self-determination, which will affect their future.

The current situation greatly complicates the organisation and the implementation of the referendum campaign in the Territory. It will be practically impossible to organise community meetings, rallies and education and awareness activities; making it impractical to engage in political campaigning.

The voter registration campaign under the complicated electoral process, a critically important issue at the heart of the referendum, which is essential to enable voters on the islands to vote in the decentralised voting bureaux (DVBDs), will be practically challenging to hold from the outset. It will be difficult or impossible to set up decentralised voting bureaux and thus to concentrate a large number of people in one place for several hours.

The social environment is therefore, in our view, not conducive to holding the fundamentally important self-determination referendum in New Caledonia on 12 December 2021. In the short to medium-term it is projected that New Caledonia will face major challenges.

Madam Chair,

In view of the evolving serious situation in New Caledonia arising from COVID-19 pandemic and the severe impact on the movement of the Territory's citizens, we respectfully call on France, as the administering Power of New Caledonia, to consider deferring New Caledonia's Third self-determination referendum to another appropriate time when the situation improves.

This will enable the people of the Territory to freely, fairly, willingly, transparently and in a just manner express themselves in the self-determination referendum on their future status.

Not doing so could have serious implications for the meaningful participation of eligible voters in the referendum process and especially those vulnerable communities who are already suffering disproportionately from the COVID-19 pandemic. It may also raise serious questions about the credibility and integrity of the referendum outcome. This needs to be avoided.

This could also provide an ideal opportunity for the General Assembly, through the C-24, to consider taking up the welcome invitation from the administering Power, France, for another UN Visiting Mission to New Caledonia to look at the situation in the Territory in the context of the self-determination process.

Madam Chair,

In closing, despite the temporary setback courtesy of the COVID-19 pandemic, the industrious people of New Caledonia and their cooperative spirit in good faith, will emerge stronger as a people and nation, going forward.

At New Caledonia's hour of need and to deliver the future the people of the Territory want, we urge this Committee to remain seized of this highly important agenda and to provide support, as necessary, and consistent with existing arrangements, including the UN Charter, the Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples, the relevant UN General Assembly resolutions and also under the Noumea Accord.

On our part as members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, whilst COVID-19 continues to remain a barrier, in the interim, to our sub-regional cooperation, we are strongly committed to our Group's "2018 Action Plan of support to the FLNKS aspiration for self-determination in New Caledonia", by further strengthening our efforts to provide capacity building and leadership training for Kanaks in MSG member countries under a "Skills Mobility Scheme" and to promote and enhance sub-regional trade among other areas of cooperation.

We are also committed to continue to engage in a spirit of constructive engagement with all relevant stakeholders, including the administering Power, to contribute to a durable, lasting and peaceful solution acceptable to all New Caledonians.

I thank you, Madam Chair.