
FRENCH SECURITY FORCES WORK TO REGAIN CONTROL OF AIRPORT HIGHWAY IN VIOLENCE-SCORCHED NEW CALEDONIA

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Using armored vehicles and backhoes to shove aside charred barricades, French security forces worked Sunday to retake control of the highway to the international airport in violence-scorched New Caledonia, shuttered because of deadly unrest wracking the French Pacific archipelago where indigenous people have long sought independence from France.

An eventual reopening of the Nouméa-La Tontouta airport to commercial flights could allow stranded tourists to escape the island where armed clashes, arson, looting and other mayhem have prompted France to impose a state of emergency. The airport, with routes to Australia, Singapore, New Zealand and other destinations, closed Tuesday as protests against voting reforms opposed by pro-independence supporters degenerated into widespread violence, leaving a vast trail of destruction.

French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin, posting on social media platform X, said the major operation was aimed at fully regaining control of the RT1 highway between the capital, Nouméa, and the airport 60 kilometers (nearly 40 miles) to the northwest. He said more than 600 gendarmes were deployed. The number spoke to the difficulty of clearing roads of charred debris and barricades erected by pro-independence demonstrators and residents who have banded together to try to protect homes and livelihoods against rioters and looters.

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