

Republic of Vanuatu

THE PRIME MINISTER



République de Vanuatu

LE PREMIER MINISTRE

Prime Minister Jotham Napat: Parliamentary address – update on maritime boundary delimitation and sovereignty over Umaenupne and Umaeneg/Leka islands. 18th May 2026

Good morning Honourable Speaker, Deputy Speakers and Honourable Members of Parliament.

I rise today in the parliamentary chamber to speak on an issue that goes to the heart of our identity and our right to self-determination - the return of sovereignty over Umaenupne and Umaeneg/Leka islands, completion of the decolonisation process, and the delimitation of our maritime boundaries.

Today I will provide Members with an update on our fight for the return of these islands and the delimitation of our maritime boundaries with New Caledonia, including progress on the current negotiations with France.

First, please let me provide Members with some important background. This July, our nation celebrates 46 years of independence.

However, our journey to independence is not yet complete.

It will only be complete when we secure sovereignty over our land and our seas.

We are a nation of 83 islands. As we all know, two of our 83 islands are Umaenupne and Umaeneg/Leka islands. These islands are sacred and have been part of Vanuatu for generations.

As you know, communities across the southern islands of Aneityum, Futuna, and Tanna maintain enduring bloodlines and cultural connections to these islands.

We do not regard these islands nor any other islands in Vanuatu as resources to be exploited, but as gifts from our ancestors for our children and future generations. As guardians, we have a duty to protect them.

But France also lays claims to these islands. France wrongly claimed these islands as part of New Caledonia during colonial occupation, and they did so without any consultation and without any form of consent from the ni-Vanuatu people.

They consulted neighbouring countries and did not consult us. They have even ignored the persistent and very clear position of the Kanak population, our friends, that these islands are not theirs and belong to Vanuatu. This is an appalling colonial practice that saw external powers wrongfully claiming what was never theirs and defining our borders!

Since our independence, we have continued to fight for international recognition that these islands belong to, and have always belonged to, the people of Vanuatu.

And we are using all the pathways that are available to us – including those under international law.

In July 2025, I, along with Deputy Prime Minister Johnny Koanapo met with French President Emmanuel Macron. At this meeting we discussed how we could resolve these issues.

President Macron agreed to resume negotiations on the delimitation of maritime boundaries and most importantly the sovereignty over Umaenupne and Umaeneg/Leka islands. He appeared genuine and committed to a speedy resolution – I thank him for this. It was specifically agreed there would be two rounds of talks before the end of last year to try and find a solution on both matters.

Since that meeting, we have been preparing for negotiations.

I appointed Deputy Prime Minister Johnny Koanapo as Lead Negotiator for Maritime Boundary Delimitation, Sovereignty, and Decolonisation matters.

We engaged DLA Piper, one of the world's largest and most influential law firms, to represent Vanuatu's legal interests.

We worked together to re-enliven engagement with France on this matter. This has been extensive. We have been through 8 archives in 6 countries since then to ensure we have everything. I thank the governments of Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom for maintaining such impressive records and for co-operating with our team. France too has very extensive archives. Disappointingly they have not granted access to all of the documents on this matter – I am not sure what

they are trying to hide from us. One thing is clear from this research – we can find no evidence of France consulting our people over the islands.

We prepared our position to present at the first round of talks with France in November.

And on Thursday 20th November 2025, a delegation from Paris led by Special Envoy Director Benoît Guidée arrived in Port Vila for talks. I gave opening remarks, and the Lead Negotiator chaired the meeting on behalf of Vanuatu.

Chiefs from the southern islands of Aneityum, Futuna, and Tanna also travelled to Port Vila to give presentations, to convey the significance of the islands and the important role they play in our cultural life, as testimonies that the two islands are part of us. Their presentations were powerful and their unity and passion was clear for all to see.

At the meeting we made it clear that these discussions about sovereignty, decolonisation, and maritime boundaries, centred on accountability for colonial rule.

The shadow of colonialism still lingers - and our voices are treated as secondary to the interests of foreign states. And the cultural and economic deprivation that stems from colonialism still thrives.

The very principle of self-determination, enshrined in international law and championed by the United Nations, states that people have the right to determine their political status and control their lands and resources free from interference. Sovereignty should reflect indigenous ties, not colonial occupation.

We felt these first talks with France were productive. We thought they had formed a solid basis for a pathway forward. However, since then progress with France has been slow.

Recent developments have shown that France's position may remain deeply entrenched. French politicians and authorities have publicly stated that they do not contemplate any renunciation of sovereignty over these islands, despite the ongoing negotiations.

We have also seen questions raised, both in Vanuatu and beyond, about France's seriousness and commitment to resolving this issue in good faith.

The second round of negotiations, which was supposed to take place last year, was pushed back to early this year, and now to the end of June, effectively doubling the timeline that was agreed.

We expected France to follow through on what had been agreed. But so far they have dragged their feet. This is not the conduct of a partner acting with urgency or respect for our shared commitments.

We are not seeking conflict with France. We are seeking dialogue and honesty. We are expecting France to act with integrity and do what they say they are going to do. How is our friendship with France serving us? How are they treating us like friends?

The second round of negotiations is scheduled for the end of June. We are currently preparing for this second round.

We have established a Maritime Boundary, Sovereignty, and Decolonisation Unit to co-ordinate our efforts and support the Lead Negotiator in his role, and to support the negotiations process.

It is shameful that a special Unit for Sovereignty and Decolonisation is needed in the 21st Century, but it is.

We have appointed Mr. Sumbue Antas to head this Maritime Boundary, Sovereignty and Decolonisation Unit. He was Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Vanuatu to the United Nations Office and Other International Organizations including the World Trade Organisation.

Mr Antas will be returning to Port Vila to lead a small and dedicated team that will coordinate the legal, political, and diplomatic workstreams required for this fight.

The team will also coordinate with other stakeholders here in Vanuatu and across our Melanesian neighbourhood, as well as other allies in the Pacific and around the globe.

Our Melanesian brothers and sisters, including the Kanaky leaders of New Caledonia, who were here in Port Vila recently to express their solidarity and support for Vanuatu's rightful claim to the islands, stand shoulder to shoulder with us in this fight. They feel deeply that a resolution of this dispute will not only give international recognition to our cultural ties to the islands, but also signify that post-colonial land and territory disputes can be resolved, even decades after independence. This solidarity reflects a shared understanding that these islands are not merely part of our geography, but part of our identity and history.

Clearly defined and agreed maritime boundaries between Vanuatu and New Caledonia, and confirming ni-Vanuatu sovereignty over Umaenupne and Umaeneg/Leka islands will foster regional cooperation and support global stability.

As we prepare for the second round of talks in June, we are developing our position on the different elements of the negotiations.

We have also carefully evaluated all of the legal options that are available to us. We are trying the diplomatic pathway, but we are also ready to change strategy as soon as is necessary.

Vanuatu will not accept further delay, nor will we engage in a process that lacks a genuine mandate to resolve the central issue of sovereignty. Any negotiation of this nature must be conducted in good faith, with both parties prepared to address all issues on the table. If it becomes clear that there is no willingness to meaningfully consider the question of sovereignty, then these discussions risk becoming an empty exercise. Vanuatu will not participate in talks that do not offer a credible pathway to resolution. In those circumstances, we will be prepared to pursue all available legal, diplomatic, and international avenues to secure the return of our islands

We will not take a passive approach. And we will not abandon our claim. We will defend our sovereignty with determination, with unity, and with resolve. We will continue the fight for the return of our islands.

France says its values are liberty, equality, and fraternity. But what liberty exists when they deny Vanuatu our right to sovereignty. What equality exists between a nuclear power and a small island developing state? What is fraternity when French morals don't apply in the Pacific.

I am addressing Members of Parliament today, to provide an update on this important issue and to reaffirm the need for your continued support. Pursuing and achieving this goal will require bipartisan commitment and a coordinated

national effort. We are and must remain united in our pursuit of sovereignty and ensure this matter stays a national priority.

This is an issue that rises above politics. I urge all Members of Parliament to recognise it as a shared national responsibility. I ask that you stand with the Government, offer your support where you can, and help ensure that Vanuatu speaks with a clear, consistent, and united voice in both domestic discussions and international engagements. We must make clear to everyone , that Vanuatu will not compromise on its sovereignty.

In closing, let us remember our responsibility to the ancestors who entrusted these islands to us and to the generations who will inherit our decisions.

I will ask our Lead Negotiator to keep the National Cabinet informed, and to continue to keep Parliament fully informed as negotiations progress, and I encourage all of us - as leaders - to advocate for the return of our two islands - Umaenupne and Umaeneg/Leka islands – and for the finalisation of our independence journey.