Outrage Over Dubai Rape Case

By VIVIENNE WALT/PARIS  Monday, Nov. 05, 2007
What allegedly happened in Dubai one steaming evening last summer would have been chilling enough in itself — the rape of a teenager by three strangers. But that act of violence also risks transforming a glittering metropolis and vacation destination, in the minds of some people, into a place to be avoided, and the attack has sparked strong reaction everywhere from Hollywood to the top levels of the French government.

Last July 14, Alexandre Robert, a 15-year-old French-Swiss youth living in Dubai with his hotel-manager father, was offered a ride home by an Emirati acquaintance from a beach club, where he was with a French friend. In the car were two local men. According to Alexandre, he was placed in the middle backseat, while the men drove the teenagers beyond the neon-soaked skyline and into the desert, where the three local men took turns raping him at knifepoint in the dark. His French friend was ordered to wait outside the car, and has told police he was not attacked. When the men finally deposited the distraught boys back in the city, they threatened to attack Alexandre's family if he dared report them to the police.

The men could scarcely have expected what has unfolded since — an international incident involving President Nicolas Sarkozy and the United Arab Emirates leader Sheikh Zayid bin Sultan al-Nahyan. Last week, Alexandre's mother launched a website called "Boycott Dubai," hoping to hit at the economic heart of a city-state that has spent billions turning itself into one of the world's top financial centers and a Western-friendly resort spot.

At home in Paris that Bastille Day holiday, Alexandre's mother Véronique got the call at four in the morning telling her what had happened. "My instinct was to get on the first plane to Dubai," she says. But another instinct kicked in too — that of a veteran political journalist, with connections at the top levels of the Elysée Palace and the French foreign ministry. Within minutes of speaking to Alexandre, Véronique Robert — who spent years as a producer for Canal Plus Television — woke up French diplomats in Dubai, who dispatched the consulate's attorney to accompany Alexandre back to the Dubai police station.

The previous evening, Alexandre had given a three-hour statement alone to the police, but it was neither recorded nor translated, according to Véronique Robert, citing
accounts from Alexandre and his father. The police
doctor who examined Alexandre declared that there was
no physical sign of rape, and suggested that Alexandre
was instead concealing his homosexuality. Homosexual
sex is a criminal act in Dubai, punishable with one year
in jail.

The consulate attorney delivered dramatically different
results. After he persuaded Dubai police to take a new
statement from Alexandre, police arrested and charged
two men within hours, thanks to the license plate
Alexandre had glimpsed in the near-dark, and
Alexandre's ability to spot them in a police lineup. The
two men go on trial this Wednesday, charged with
"forced homosexuality," knife-wielding and kidnapping;
the third suspected attacker — the acquaintance of
Alexandre — will stand trial in a juvenile court.

Véronique Robert has worked her journalistic contacts to
press her son's case, and got early word to Sarkozy of
what had happened. In an Elysée meeting in July,
Sarkozy told the UAE leader that he wanted "utmost
attention" given to Alexandre's alleged attack, according
to a confidential diplomatic telex from the French
ambassador to the Emirates to his bosses in Paris.

Despite that, Dubai officials reported three times that the
two suspects were not infected with the HIV virus,
according to French diplomats, even though that
appears to be untrue. A document released by
government officials to French diplomats in August
showed that one man had tested positive while in prison
four years ago. Alexandre will receive word only in
January whether he was infected during the alleged
attack. "There is a lot of malfunctioning, but from where
I do not know," says a French diplomat in Dubai,
explaining the bungling over the AIDS tests. In late
October, the French foreign ministry added a warning
for travelers about crime in Dubai.

French officials in Dubai have offered Alexandre
diplomatic protection this week in Dubai; he and his
mother fly from Paris on Tuesday to attend the trial.
"Let's be honest, I never wanted to go back but I want
justice, so I have to," Alexandre told TIME in Paris on
Monday.

The bungled police reports about the suspects' AIDS
status has helped spread the controversy all the way to
Hollywood. Sharon Stone is preparing to host a major
fund-raiser in Dubai on December 10 for the Foundation
for AIDS Research, or amfAR, for which she heads global
fund-raising. The event will be part of the Dubai
International Film Festival, and Stone's trip to Dubai has
garnered major coverage in Dubai's Gulf News daily. On
Friday evening, as TIME met Véronique Robert in a Paris
café, amfAR's organizers in Manhattan called her to
express concern about Alexandre's alleged attack and ask
what she wanted them to do about the Dubai event. The
organization's chief executive officer, Kevin Frost, says
has not ruled out canceling the fund-raiser — whose
tables are selling for between $20,000 and $100,000
each. But he said amfAR sees the event as "an
opportunity to raise awareness about AIDS in a part of
the world where there's an incredible amount of denial
about the issue.” Véronique Robert says she hopes the organization will speak about her son’s attack during its high-profile event. For Dubai, accustomed to glowing articles about its astonishing growth and impressive architecture, that would indeed be rare — and unsettling — publicity.

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**Quotes of the Day »**

"We all lived through Lehman Brothers. I don't want another such threat to emanate from Europe."

German Chancellor ANGELA MERKEL, speaking about the importance of an airtight Greek bailout package; European ministers delayed the $17 billion lifeline Monday until Greece agrees to strict austerity measures

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