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Dubai: the Sheikh and his daughters

by GWYNNE DYER

Dubai can be amusing, in a voyeuristic way, for a week or two. Tallest building in the world and the mall with the shark tank, but it's the people, really.

There are a quarter-million expats, mostly British or American, living much higher on the hog than they ever could at home ? but bored out of their minds, like refugees from a Somerset Maugham novel. Drunken buffet lunches on Fridays at one of the big hotels are as good as it gets.

Offstage, there are also a couple of million servants, menials and labourers, mostly from the Indian subcontinent. They are probably bored too, but nobody bothers to ask.

And there are a quarter-million native-born Arab citizens, most of them quite prosperous but also bored, though the richer ones console themselves with stables of race-horses and the like. The richest of them all is Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the absolute ruler of Dubai.

The Sheikh has 25 children by his six wives, so he obviously loves children, but unaccountably his daughters keep trying to escape. He recaptures them and locks them up, of course, but it's starting to draw unwelcome attention.

In the good old days, potentates from the oil-rich parts of the Middle East could get away with anything. When Maktoum's daughter Shamsa ran away from the family's compound in Surrey while on holiday in 2000, the Sheikh didn't contact the English police. He just sent his own agents out to find her.

They tracked her down a month later in Cambridge, where four Arab men grabbed her on the street, bundled her into a car, and injected her with a sedative. She was flown back to Dubai on a private jet, and has not been seen in public since. (She would be in her early 40s now, but the Dubai government says she is ?adored and cherished? by her family.)

Two years later her younger half-sister, Latifa, made her first escape attempt at the age of 16. She was caught crossing the border into Oman and brought back to Dubai, where she was jailed for three years. She says she was kept in solitary confinement and tortured.

Princess Latifa doesn't try to escape again until 2018, when she made it to the coast of Oman with the help of her Finnish fitness instructor, thence out to a yacht in international waters by dinghy and jet-ski, and off to India, from where she planned to fly to the United States and seek asylum. (Good luck with that; Donald Trump was still president.)

Unfortunately, eight days later and only 30 km off Goa, they were boarded by Emirati commandos from an Indian Navy ship (Prime Minister Modi's government still sucks up to rich Arabs), and Latifa was ?tranquilised' again and flown back to Dubai.

For the past two years she has been held in solitary confinement in a seaside ?villa'. (?Safe with her family,? as the Dubai government put it.) But at some point a mobile phone was smuggled in to her, and she began locking herself in the bathroom and sending out secret videos to her Finnish friend, Tiina Jauhiainen.

?This villa has been converted into a jail,? she said. ?All the windows are barred shut. There's five policemen outside and two policewomen inside the house. And I can't even go outside to get any fresh air.? Jauhiainen told the British authorities (because Shamsa had been kidnapped on British soil) and the United Nations, but she didn't go public for fear of compromising Latifa's secret phone.

That phone went dead five months ago, so now the ?family' knows. Fortunately, there is now some support from the British, because Latifa's stepmother, Princess Haya bint Al Hussein, took her two children and fled to London in 2019.

Last year the British High Court issued a ?fact-finding judgment' confirming that both Shamsa and Latifa had been kidnapped and were being illegally held. It denied Maktoum's demand that his children with Princess Haya be returned to his custody, and said that the Sheikh's campaign of intimidation against her included having a pistol left on her pillow.

That's where it stands at the moment, but now the UN is getting involved: the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said it will soon question the United Arab Emirates about Princess Latifa, and a spokesman said the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention could launch an investigation once Princess Latifa's videos have been analysed.

But that may not be enough, because now it has become a question of face for Sheikh Mohammed. He knows what all the other kings and sheikhs of the Gulf are saying about him. They're saying ?Why can't Mohammed control his women??