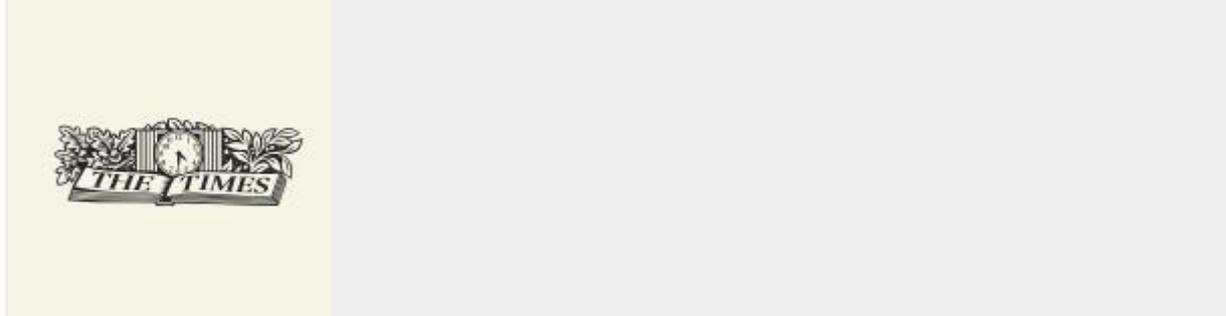


LEADING ARTICLES

January 8 2020, 12:01am, the times

Bad Judgment

The Cyprus rape case has shone a spotlight on the island's murky politics



The British teenager convicted of making a false rape accusation in Cyprus has finally returned home after a five-month ordeal. The judge, having presided over a highly questionable trial, sensibly decided to hand down a four-month suspended sentence. That meant the young woman could leave the island immediately. This at least will enable her to get on with life back in Britain, including taking up the university place she was forced to defer last year. Nonetheless her ordeal is still not completely over, since she returns with the stain of a criminal record which her lawyers say she will try to overturn on appeal.

The greater stain may ultimately be on the reputation of Cyprus itself. This case has shone a harsh spotlight on the island's police and judicial procedures amid questions about how this young woman ever came to be on trial. She had filed a complaint of gang rape against 12 Israeli men and teenagers after discovering that some of them had filmed her having consensual sex with one of their group. She found herself in the dock when she retracted her allegation after an eight-hour police interrogation during which she did not have access to a lawyer. The judge said that this confession, which a linguistics expert told the court showed clear signs of having been dictated by a non-native English speaker, proved her guilt beyond reasonable doubt. Yet the lack of a lawyer, or even a recording of the police interview, was a breach of the protections that European Union law requires to be offered to anyone suspected of an offence.

In a rational world the case against her would have been dropped at the same time as the charges against the Israelis. Indeed, this is what two former Cypriot attorney-generals urged. Instead the trial judge compounded criticism of the police's handling of the case by refusing to hear any evidence relating to the alleged assault. That included claims that the young woman had 35 bruises on her body. Meanwhile, the British teenager's ordeal was deepened when footage of her having sex with the Israeli man was posted online and quickly found its way on to pornography sites. No action has been taken against the men, who returned to Israel to a heroes' welcome even though posting revenge porn is a criminal offence there.

Exactly why the attorney-general, Costas Clerides, did not act on the advice of his predecessors is an open question. Mr Clerides has said that once the girl levelled accusations about the Cypriot justice system it was important that the case was settled in court. That suggests that he prioritised saving the police's reputation over the wellbeing of a vulnerable young woman. Others, including in Cyprus and Israel, have speculated that the decision to prosecute was political. At least some of the Israelis come from well-connected families. One is the son of a prominent adviser to the mayor of Jerusalem.

Cyprus has been cultivating deeper ties with Israel in recent months with the goal of securing a pipeline deal to transport gas to Europe.

If so, this would hardly be the first time that Cyprus has found itself the centre of international attention as a result of its economic choices. The country's financial collapse in 2012 exposed the extent to which it had allowed itself to become a haven for the laundering of murky Russian money. Despite government claims to have addressed the problem the perception that Cyprus remains in thrall to political forces remains. This case will only have reinforced it.

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