Princess Latifa: secret videos raise fears for ruler's daughter forcibly returned to Dubai

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The daughter of the ruler of [Dubai](https://www.theguardian.com/world/dubai), who tried to flee the emirate in 2018 but was forcibly returned, has used a smuggled phone to send a series of secret video messages taken over the past two years claiming she was being held “hostage” in a locked villa surrounded by police.

The messages have since ceased, and campaigners for Princess Latifa al-Maktoum are calling for international intervention in her case.

The [new videos were obtained by BBC Panorama](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-56075528) and will be aired in more detail on Tuesday evening in the UK. They are the first time the princess has appeared, other than in material released by the Dubai royal family, since a YouTube video surfaced after her escape attempt three years ago.

“If you are watching this video, it’s not such a good thing, either I’m dead or I’m in a very, very, very bad situation,” she said in that footage, which sparked international concern for her fate.

The UAE government has previously said Latifa, 35, is safe and happy with her family.

The new videos include her first account of how her attempt to flee in January 2018, which was years in the making, failed. In an operation planned with a French businessman, Hervé Jaubert, and her martial arts instructor and friend Tiina Jauhiainen, Latifa took a dinghy from the Dubai shore to a US-flagged yacht in international waters.

Eight days later, off India’s west coast, the yacht was stormed by special forces who, Jauhiainen claims, used smoke grenades to force her and Latifa to the deck and detained them at gunpoint.

A UK judge last year [accepted testimony](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/uk/uk-judge-finds-that-indian-military-did-capture-princess-latifa-and-send-her-back-to-detention-in-dubai/articleshow/74528899.cms) that the raid was conducted by Indian soldiers and that Latifa and others may have given their position away by communicating with people while at sea. “Latifa’s last words as she was dragged away kicking and screaming were to the effect that ‘You can’t get me back alive. Don’t take me back. Shoot me here, don’t take me back’,” the judgment read.

In the new footage, recorded more than a year after Latifa was returned, she tells of struggling with the soldiers on the boat, “kicking and fighting” and biting a commando’s arm, the BBC said. She says she was tranquillised and passed out as she was being carried to a jet, waking up in Dubai.

Jauhiainen and Jaubert were detained in the UAE for two weeks and then released.

Latifa’s father is [Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/05/kidnapping-court-judgment-can-sheikh-mohammeds-reputation-survive), the ruler of Dubai and the UAE’s vice-president. She is the second of his 25 children to try to flee the family, be recaptured, and then vanish.

Her older sister [Shamsa was seized on the streets of Cambridge](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/dec/10/jamiewilson.stuartmillar) after fleeing the family’s Surrey estate in 2000. In an email she smuggled out from captivity in Dubai, Shamsa alleged: “I was caught by my father, he managed to track me down through someone I kept in touch with … He sent four Arab men to catch me, they were carrying guns and threatening me.”

Latifa said in the [video recorded before her escape bid](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UN7OEFyNUkQ) that she had tried to escape once before, aged 16, but was captured at the border, jailed for more than three years, and beaten and tortured. “It was constant torture, constant torture, even when they weren’t physically beating me up, they were torturing me,” Latifa said. “They would make sounds to harass me and then they would come in the middle of the night, to pull me out of bed, to beat me.”

A UK family court [ruled last year](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/05/dubai-ruler-sheikh-mohammed-organised-kidnapping-of-his-children-uk-court-finds) that Sheikh Mohammed, 71, orchestrated the abductions of the two women and “deprived [them] of their liberty”. The judgment was part of an action involving his sixth and youngest wife, Princess Haya, 46, who fled to London in April 2019 with their two young children, and whom the court said had been subjected to a campaign of “intimidation” by the sheikh.

The judgment accepted virtually all Haya’s allegations as true on the balance of probabilities, including that the sheikh attempted to have her abducted by helicopter, arranged for guns to be left in her bedroom and published threatening poems about her online.

Mary Robinson, a former Irish president and UN high commissioner for human rights, was flown to Dubai to meet Latifa after she was returned there in 2018. The UAE foreign ministry later released pictures of the visit, claiming they showed Latifa was “receiving the necessary care and support she requires” and “rebut[ted] false allegations”. Robinson also later said Latifa was “in the loving care of her family”.

But Robinson told the BBC she had been “horribly tricked” during the visit and never asked Latifa about her situation, fearing it would exacerbate a mental condition she was told the princess had. The images were intended be private and to serve as a “proof of life”, she added. “I was particularly tricked when the photographs went public. That was a total surprise … I was absolutely stunned.”