

No woman is safe in a minicab, says rape judge

By **Ben Taylor**
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A JUDGE issued an alarming warning to minicab passengers yesterday that they cannot expect to travel in safety.

Jailing an asylum seeker for eight years for raping a secretary, Recorder Michael Sayers, QC, said those hiring a private taxi simply had no way of knowing the driver's background.

He called for compulsory licensing of all cab drivers after police checks on the firm where the rapist worked revealed that not one driver was being legally employed.

'It appears that nobody can travel in minicabs with any degree of assurance or safety, as demonstrated by the facts in this case,' said the judge.

'At the moment, when a member of the public takes a cab he has no assurance that the driver is who he claims to be or has got any insurance or driving licence. He has no way of knowing how the driver conducts his business.

'This is something that should be investigated. If minicab drivers are driving around with false iden-

'Quite a worrying state of affairs'

titles, it is something that should be looked into and investigated properly. I find it quite a worrying state of affairs.'

The case has highlighted a growing problem in our cities, where a burgeoning nightclub culture and lack of public transport has led to a boom in the use of minicabs.

These are separate from licensed black cabs and are supposed to be booked in advance over the telephone or in person at a central office.

There are around 100,000 private hire drivers in the UK. Powers to license them have been on the statute book since 1998 but the law's enforcement depends heavily on the policy of the local authority.

In London, men and women desperate to get home have resorted to hailing unlicensed 'taxi touts' who ply for trade by driving through the city's entertainment areas.

Police figures show that 214 women were sexually assaulted in the capital last year after getting into illegal minicabs and 54 raped.

Razaq Assadullah, 31, who worked for Speedline Cars in Stratford, East London, was an asylum seeker who came to Britain from Afghanistan in 2000.

He was convicted last December

'You have no assurance the driver is who he claims to be, has any insurance or a driving licence'



Michael Sayers: Call for an investigation

of raping the 28-year-old secretary and was sentenced at the Old Bailey yesterday.

In a reference to the rapist's background, the judge told him: 'You were certainly aware of the gravity of the crime of rape as it would be met by a sentence of death by stoning.'

The woman got into the cab after a night out in a wine bar in Stratford last July.

After dropping off her best friend, Assadullah parked the car and turned off the engine before attacking the woman in the back seat. He stopped only when disturbed by two cyclists.

The Old Bailey heard that Assadullah, from Plaistow, East London, set himself up as a cab driver by buying a false driving

licence for £200 and using a false name. Police checks revealed he was driving without insurance.

Further inquiries into the rapist's firm revealed that each of its 32 drivers was working illegally in some way - either through their immigration status or by claiming benefit while working.

The judge told Assadullah: 'With a mixture of arrogance and cynical opportunism you abused your position of trust.'

'She was placed in your cab by a friend who paid you to get her home safely.'

'She was put through a terrifying ordeal and she faced the added trauma of not knowing whether you might be a murderer as well as a rapist.'

Assadullah, a father of three,

was granted leave to remain last year after claiming he had been tortured by the Taliban. The judge recommended his deportation.

Richard Massett, of the London Taxi Drivers' Association, said: 'It's been five years since regulation was approved in Parliament and nothing has happened.'

'We advise women travelling home alone late at night to use a licensed black cab if possible or, if not, to book a minicab by phone and ensure that it comes from the place where they booked it.'

Detective Constable Malcolm Samuels, of the Metropolitan Police, said that because many minicab drivers work on a self-employed basis there is little incentive for the firm's owner to check on them.