

Bettencourt scandal: I'm 'a marked man', says Banier in an interview with AFP

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6th October 2010

PARIS — Writer and photographer François-Marie Banier feels that he has become a 'marked man' and, in an exclusive interview with AFP, demands that his trial for alleged *abus de faiblesse* (taking advantage of a psychologically fragile person) with respect to Liliane Bettencourt – currently postponed *sine die* - should take place as soon as possible.

What is your state of mind today?

"I've become a marked man. There's been an indictment, and now I want a trial to put an end to this hatchet job carried out by professionals. They carefully change the truth, engulfing justice in rumour and creating a curtain so opaque that public opinion has already decided I'm guilty. Françoise Meyers-Bettencourt (Liliane's daughter, who first took legal action for *abus de faiblesse*) prefers public controversy to hearing witnesses and looking at evidence.

It's an investigation that has taken place through the keyhole. I find it a real shame and very disloyal that Liliane Bettencourt, an absolutely remarkable and unique woman, should be mocked in this way and targeted by people who once worked for her and whom she herself dismissed from their jobs".

Do you see yourself as a victim?

"Yes, I do. I am a hostage in three conflicts that have precious little to do with me and to which I feel entirely alien: a conflict between mother and daughter, another between the public prosecutor and the judge, and a third between the magistracy and public authority. I don't understand why the trial has been postponed, insofar as what I am supposed to have done took place from 2002 to 2007 and is unrelated to the recordings made by God knows who in 2009, which hardly concern me at all. If my mother had been abused, I'd leap at the first opportunity to take it to trial, but Mme Meyers-Bettencourt keeps putting it off. Why doesn't she want a trial where all this can be properly discussed?"

Do you challenge the witness statements collected by judge Isabelle Prévost-Desprez?

"It really is extraordinary to see that the accountant Claire Thibout, who accuses me of having Liliane in my thrall, received 400,000 euros from the plaintiff and that most of the witnesses for the prosecution have admitted having been sent to see Françoise Meyers-Bettencourt's business lawyer before making their statements. There are plenty of statements that contradict the plaintiff's version of events, but the press doesn't mention those. Mme Thibout says they hid the key to the jewellery boxes from me, but that's not true! I refused to accept the jewellery in the presence of Liliane's *notaire*, Maître Normand. It's on notarial record!"

Don't you now regret having accepted gifts whose value is estimated by your critics at almost one billion euros?

"Does Mme Bettencourt regret our 25 years of wonderful communication? These gifts are huge, but people don't realise how big her fortune is. You can't put a price on everything. She gave me money as others give their time or their body".

And yet Mme Bettencourt has said there were money issues between you, and that she enjoyed watching you "running around". What is your response to this?

"I was very hurt by this, but what she said proves she is far from naive. Like everyone born into wealth, she knows why people try to get close to her. Are we supposed to believe she was somehow unable to detect that in my case? No, money was irrelevant, and Liliane wanted me to have some. What's so bad about that? I refused for seven years. Do you know many people who turn down gifts of grand town houses? Today, she wants to keep her distance. She's a *femme fatale*, she does as she pleases. But in my view, it's only temporary. Between Liliane and me, it'll never be completely over".

Mme Bettencourt's daughter accuses you of having isolated her mother and of having created a barrage of doctors around her. What do you think about this?

"Mme Bettencourt is friends with the world's top professors of medicine – do you think she needs my doctors? All the doctors questioned by Mme Prévost-Desprez, except Gilles Brücker (a renowned epidemiologist and executor of Liliane Bettencourt's will), have said they don't know me".

Mme Bettencourt's daughter is asking for an expert medical examination. What was Mme Bettencourt's state of mind?

"The woman attends all the l'Oréal board meetings. If there was a problem, why didn't anyone say anything? So according to l'Oréal she's not losing her mind, but in private life she is?"

Was your relationship ever violent in any way?

"To say there was any violence is a lie. Liliane would never have allowed an inappropriate word or gesture to be used".

You have just lost the two contracts between your company, Hericy, and l'Oréal. Will this affect your future in any way?

"Mme Bettencourt has taken all the necessary precautions so that I can continue to produce my work. I am extraordinarily lucky that she has made it possible for me to cope with adversity. I am quite safe".

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(Translation by Martyn Back)