

Strauss-Kahn apology seen contrived, staged
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PARIS, Sept 20 — The French media scorned what it called an insincere and staged TV apology by Dominique Strauss-Kahn for his sexual encounter with a New York hotel maid, with many noting he left the door ajar for a eventual political comeback.

Up to 13.5 million viewers watched TF1's Sunday news show, the biggest audience since 2005 for a French news broadcast, to see the former presidential hopeful voice "infinite" regret over a liaison he called ill-advised but consensual.

Strauss-Kahn said he regretted his moral error but also decried the way he had been treated as a criminal over a private act he said did not involve force.

"Everything seemed pre-prepared, rehearsed, learned by heart, set up, as if it was pre-recorded," the left-leaning Liberation daily commented yesterday.

It was the first time Strauss-Kahn spoke at length to TV cameras since the New York sex assault case ended his career as IMF head and wrecked his chances of running in France's 2012 election, but many found his hand-wringing unconvincing.

Dressed in a dark suit and clearly uncomfortable discussing the nine-minute sexual liaison, Strauss-Kahn brandished a copy of the New York prosecutor's report to stress he had been cleared of using force.

"DSK: A funny kind of mea culpa," was the headline in the more mainstream daily Le Parisien.

"His Sunday contrition was half-hearted," editorialist Vicent Giret wrote in Liberation. "When you turned off the TV, you had a furious desire to move on to something else."

A Paris office worker, who gave his name as Jean-Marie, told Reuters Television: "It didn't seem very sincere, to be honest. It seemed prepared and a tad hypocritical."

Determination peeked through

Strauss-Kahn, widely known by his initials DSK, returned to France earlier this month after prosecutors dropped charges of attempted rape over his encounter with chambermaid Nafissatou Diallo in his luxury Manhattan hotel suite.

The case sparked an international media frenzy, putting an end to the former finance minister's immediate presidential ambitions and removing an influential voice from the world stage just as the global economic crisis calls for expertise.

Strauss-Kahn, formerly seen as the left's best chance of unseating the ruling conservative party, told TF1 interviewer Claire Chazal, a friend of his wife Anne Sinclair, he would stay out of the Socialist Party's 2012 election campaign and would take time to plan his next career move.

But many felt his interview left the door open for a political comeback over the long term.

"Beneath the remorse and all the ostensible signs of sincerity, you could already see the determination peeking through," said right-wing daily Le Figaro in an editorial.

Financial daily Les Echos said that Strauss-Kahn's brief digression on the subject of the Greek debt crisis was a way of trying to make the public miss his voice on the global crisis.

For the most part, Strauss-Kahn focussed on the New York sex scandal, well aware that millions around the world, captivated by the scandal, wanted to hear his version of events.

Strauss-Kahn said he regretted causing pain to his wife and family and said deep reflection over the scandal meant he had lost forever a former "frivolity" in his dealings with women.

Political opponents were scathing in reaction.

"There was absolutely nothing spontaneous in his declarations. The trickery was so blatant that it was all hard to believe," National Front leader Marine Le Pen.

"It left me with an awful impression," Pierre Laurent, head of France's Communist Party told France Info radio. "The whole business leaves a bitter taste with all those men and women who support women's right to dignity," he said.

Strauss-Kahn's confirmation that Socialist Martine Aubry is mainly running in the party primary due to a pact with him that meant either one would run was expected to anger Aubry's camp.

Analysts said it could give a boost to Aubry's rival Francois Hollande, who is ahead in polls for the primary.

A handful of commentators felt sympathy overall for the left's fallen star, however, after he told TF1 he had "lost everything" over the New York hotel maid affair.

"He was honest, sincere, and above all very dignified. It's not easy to say all that, to admit you're at fault," Dominique Wolton, a political communication specialist, told Le Parisien.

Right-leaning daily Le Figaro said only somebody with "a heart of stone" could be left unmoved by his performance. "The man has come a long way and his life has turned into a novel, whatever you might think of the way he behaved," it said. — Reuters

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