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UBER KNOWINGLY LEASED UNSAFE CARS TO DRIVERS

Chasing growth, the ride-hailing giant bought SUVs in Singapore subject to a recall—then one caught fire

By DOUGLAS MACMILLAN
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Uber driver Koh Seng Tian had just dropped off a passenger in a residential neighborhood in Singapore when he smelled smoke in his Honda Vezel sport-utility vehicle. Flames burst from the dashboard, melting the interior and cracking a football-sized hole in his windshield.

Mr. Koh walked away unhurt, according to the accident report filed with authorities. But the fire this January caused panic at Uber Technologies Inc.

The ride-hailing company had rented the Vezel to Mr. Koh after Honda Motor Co. recalled the model in April 2016 for an electrical component that could overheat and catch fire.

Uber managers in Singapore were aware of the Honda recall when they bought more than 1,000 defective Vezels and rented them to Mr. Koh and other drivers without the needed repairs, ac-

ording to internal Uber emails and documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal and interviews with people familiar with Uber's operations in the region.

Three days after the fire, executives at Uber's San Francisco headquarters were briefed on a response plan, according to the emails and former Uber managers in Asia: The company would deactivate the faulty devices and leave the cars on the road while waiting for replacement parts. The plan called for seeking approval from Singapore authorities and advice from auto-repair experts.

In the wake of the Vezel fire, Singapore managers sought to add new safety measures, Uber said. After the fire, "we took swift action to fix the problem, in close coordination with Singapore's Land Transport Authority as well as technical experts," said an Uber spokesman. "But we acknowledge we could have done more—and we have done so."

The emails don't indicate whether San Francisco executives knew about the Vezel safety recall before Mr. Koh's car caught fire.

Mr. Koh, 61, declined to comment.

The Singapore episode, which wasn't previously public knowledge, adds to a growing list of crises that unfolded at Uber on the watch of former Chief Executive Travis Kalanick, during which he insisted on running the company like a scrappy startup although it had become a large global operation.

The eight-year-old company spread to more than 70 countries in part by giving regional teams authority to adapt to local markets and expand as quickly as possible. Yet Uber didn't build the kind of systems and professional bureaucracy that multinational companies typically employ. It has no chief financial officer or chief operating officer. Its top global-safety executive left last year, and the role has been folded into the remit of

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