

Click for more  
information



[Weather](#) | [Sports](#) | [Forums](#) | [Comics](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Movies](#)

## Haitian pastor dies on U.S. doorstep

**The 81-year-old fled after a gang destroyed his church. He sought asylum in Miami, but got detention, and a lonely death.**

By DAVID ADAMS, Times Latin America Correspondent

Published November 19, 2004

MIAMI - Haitian-Americans watched in awe this week as a group of 44 Cuban entertainers applied for political asylum in Las Vegas, unmolested by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

The treatment of the Cubans could not have contrasted more sharply with the experience of Joseph Dantica, an 81-year-old Haitian Baptist minister who recently applied for asylum in Miami.

U.S. immigration officials took the Rev. Dantica to jail, where he died before he had the chance to make his case for asylum. His family held a wake for him Thursday at a Miami funeral home.

"He died alone in a hospital bed," said his niece Edwidge Danticat, 35, who is a U.S. citizen. "It's not that the others (Cubans) don't deserve it. But there should be some fairness."

\* \* \*

The Rev. Dantica founded the Church of the Redeemer in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, 25 years ago. He was the senior pastor.

His family says that late last month, Haitian police were rounding up armed gang members supposedly loyal to ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. On Oct. 24, police and United Nations peacekeepers came to Dantica's church, in a gang-infested slum of the capital.

Dantica let them in. Police took advantage of the church's upper floors to open fire on gang members in the streets below. The next day, after police withdrew, furious gang leaders visited Dantica. They said 15 of their members died in the gun battle, and they held the elderly pastor responsible.

Dantica went into hiding; the gang attacked his church and burned the altar in the street.

On Oct. 29, Dantica and his 56-year-old son, Maxo, boarded a plane bound for Miami. Dantica carried a valid U.S. visa. He had taken the flight many times to visit family and religious colleagues in Miami and New York.

Instead of passing through immigration as a regular visitor, Dantica decided to do things right. Unlike his previous visits, he knew this time he might never return to Haiti.

When it was his turn to present his passport he announced that he wanted to seek asylum. By telling the truth, he gave up the chance to enter the country on his tourist visa. Instead, Dantica and his son were detained.

They were taken to Krome Detention Center, an immigration facility outside Miami. There, father and son were separated. The family says Dantica's high blood pressure medication was taken away from him.

The following Monday, the family secured the pro bono services of a prominent immigration law firm. Attorney John Pratt contacted the Department of Homeland Security to explain Dantica's situation and ask that he be granted a humanitarian parole on the grounds that he was an elderly clergyman in poor health.

Pratt said he was told that Dantica would have to pass a "credible fear" interview to establish that he was telling the truth about the risks he faced back home.

He was given an appointment the next morning. Dantica was brought to the hearing in his blue detainee uniform, Bible in hand. Moments before the interview he asked another Haitian to tell Pratt he needed his medicine.

Two minutes into the interview he suddenly became ill. "He started throwing up. He couldn't speak," said Pratt. "He seemed to be having a seizure."

He was taken to a medical facility.

Soon after, when Pratt spoke to the Homeland Security supervisor at Krome, he was informed that Dantica would be released without the credible fear interview. By then it was too late.

The medical details of what happened next are not clear. Dantica was moved to Jackson Memorial Hospital in downtown Miami; Homeland Security officials refused to allow the family to visit him there.

"They said it was for security reasons," said Pratt. "It seemed preposterous. What are they going to do, break out a sick old man?"

Later that night the family learned that Dantica had died.

Homeland Security rejected any responsibility for Dantica's death. "Mr. Dantica died of pancreatitis while in Homeland Security custody, which an autopsy by the Miami-Dade County medical examiner's office

revealed as a pre-existing and fatal condition," the department said.

It added that it was "unfortunate" that he died during the asylum interview. "We understand his family's grief, but there is no connection between the pre-existing terminal medical condition he had and the process through which he entered the country."

Homeland Security said Dantica was carrying "no legitimate prescribed medicine." All he had in his possession was a "folk remedy," which the department described as some kind of "poultice" or dressing.

"We're completely outraged by the way he was treated," said Danticat, the pastor's niece. She is an acclaimed Haitian-American novelist and winner of the 1999 American Book Award, among a host of literary triumphs.

"He was no threat to this country. He had family nearby. We only live 15 minutes from the airport. We were ready to take responsibility for him," she said.

Dantica's death comes amid heated political debate over the status of some 20,000 undocumented Haitians who are seeking "temporary protected status" to prevent them from being deported to Haiti.

"The government of the U.S. has hunkered down in a policy that says no Haitian at any cost will be treated evenly and fairly," said Jocelyn McCalla, director of the New York-based National Coalition for Haitian Rights. "It's a take no prisoners attitude."

In a letter to the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Miami, said Dantica's death "warrants higher level attention than it has received, particularly in the light of previous complaints about the treatment of Haitians."

Pratt and other immigration attorneys say the handling of Dantica's case is not so unusual under the tight post-Sept. 11 immigration regulations.

Unlike Cubans fleeing communism, who are allowed automatic entry if they reach U.S. shores, undocumented Haitians are routinely detained. U.S. officials have gone as far as arguing that the Haitians represent a national security threat; Attorney General John Ashcroft recently cited intelligence reports that Muslim terrorists were trying to use Haiti to infiltrate the United States.

In Dantica's case, what most perplexes immigration rights advocates is Homeland Security's insistence on isolating him from his family.

Said Pratt: "To not allow a man who is 81 years old to spend the few remaining hours of his life with those closest to him - that's unconscionable."

\* \* \*

Some relatives will be missing at Dantica's funeral in Brooklyn Saturday. The family says U.S. consular

officials in Haiti rejected a visa application Wednesday by Dantica's sister, Anne-Marie, and three nieces.

At Thursday night's wake, Danticat fondly recalled how Uncle Joseph raised her in Haiti after her parents left for the United States. Though many of his relatives moved to the United States, she said the pastor remained committed to his work. "He never expressed any desire of coming here."

© Copyright 2003 St. Petersburg Times. All rights reserved