

**November 24, 2004**

**OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR**

## **A Very Haitian Story**

**By EDWIDGE DANTICAT**

**M**iami — On Sunday, Oct. 24, United Nations troops and Haitian police forces launched a military operation in Bel-Air, one of the poorest and most volatile neighborhoods in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince. Their stated goal was to oust armed gangs, some of which are still loyal to Haiti's deposed president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

During the clash that followed, United Nations peacekeepers used the roof of a three-story building that housed a church and school run by my 81-year-old uncle, the Rev. Joseph N. Dantica and his son, Maxo, to fire into the alley below. Official sources count relatively few casualties for the day, but although he may never be counted as part of the official death toll, my uncle was a victim too, not just of the violence in Haiti, but also of the prejudice of American immigration officials. Before my uncle lost his life in a series of catastrophic events that unraveled from the moment the military forces crossed his threshold, he told another side of that story.

When the international and combined Haitian forces left Bel-Air, gang members came to my uncle's home, told him that 15 of their friends had been killed and said he had to pay for the burials or die. Having lived and worked in Bel-Air for more than 50 years, he had known some of these young men since they were boys, and they allowed him a few minutes to make a phone call. He grabbed a few important papers and fled to a nearby house.

My uncle hid under a neighbor's bed for three days as the gang members searched for him. They ransacked his home and church and set the school on fire. When he was finally able to leave, he and Maxo traveled to the United States - my uncle on a multiple-entry visa, just as he had, many times, for more than 30 years.

But this time, when immigration officials at Miami International Airport asked my uncle how long he would be staying, he explained that he would be killed if he returned to Haiti and that he and Maxo wanted asylum. They were arrested and taken to the Krome Detention Center, where, my uncle told his lawyer three days later, the medicine he had brought with him from Haiti - a combination of both herbal and prescription medicines for an inflamed prostate and high blood pressure - was taken away from him.

Twenty-four hours later, still in custody, he died at a nearby hospital.

Sadly, even with its extreme circumstances, my uncle's case is not unusual in terms of his tragic confrontation with Haiti's current political turmoil and the Homeland Security Department's dismissive treatment of Haitian asylum seekers. When he left Port-au-Prince, my uncle joined a long list of desperate, ill-fated Haitians who are fleeing a country that is plagued not only by gang warfare, rebel attacks, summary arrests and other human rights violations, but also ecological disasters: in September, flash floods caused by Tropical Storm Jeanne killed 1,900 people and left 200,000 more homeless.

Still, while the American government just renewed, for the fourth time, another 18-month term of the Temporary Protected Status granted to approximately 85,000 Hondurans and Nicaraguans after Hurricane Mitch in 1998, it will not give the same status to 20,000 Haitians living here. It denies Haitians this status even though the interim government in Haiti (with the backing of both Democratic and Republican officials in the United States) appealed for the measure to give Haiti time to stabilize its security system and recover from a severe housing shortage resulting from the ravages of Jeanne. Homeland Security officials often cite security concerns and the fear of mass migration to justify their immigration policy for Haitians but is it really wise for the United States to allow a country so close to Florida to so seriously decay?

In February, the United States (along with Canada and France) organized a regime change in Haiti and then withdrew its forces, leaving a meager Brazil-led force to pick up where it left off. Despite the international aid money that has been pledged to Haiti, the absence of a viable security force and the lack of other much needed infrastructure - like roads, schools and medical care - inhibits real recovery and perpetuates an environment that not only makes life in Haiti dangerous but unlivable for its poorest and most vulnerable residents.

Like Nicaraguans and Hondurans, Haitians should be granted temporary protection status while Haiti tries to recover from the political plagues and environmental disasters suffocating it. Like the claims from Cubans, Haitian asylum claims should be considered fairly and humanely so that calamities like my uncle's flight and eventual death in the custody of the Homeland Security Department, are never repeated.

*Edwidge Danticat is the author, most recently, of "The Dew Breaker."*

[Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)