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Death of man, 81, in U.S. custody another Haitian tragedy

By Amy Bracken
The Associated Press

November 27, 2004, 10:47 AM EST

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- The Rev. Joseph Dantica fled to the United States nearly a month ago seeking asylum because gangs in his neighborhood ransacked his church and threatened to kill him if he stayed.

Though the 81-year-old Baptist pastor escaped safely to Miami, he died five days later in the custody of U.S. immigration authorities -- in disputed circumstances that relatives say boil down to mistreatment.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security categorically denies Dantica's detention had anything to do with his Nov. 3 death. The medical examiner listed inflammation of the pancreas as the cause of death.

But his family points to other factors, saying his death underlines gross problems in the way Haitians are treated upon arrival in the United States.

Dantica's son, 56-year-old Maxo Dantica, was detained with his father and said the pastor's health declined after officials took away prescription pills and herbal medicine he was taking for a swollen prostate and high blood pressure.

DHS Spokesman Russ Knocke said Dantica had no "legitimate" medication on him, only something the pastor called his "Voodoo medicine." The agency is conducting an internal investigation but says Dantica was treated fairly and according to policy.

In Haiti, Dantica had presided at a Baptist church that he founded three decades ago in the Port-au-Prince slum of Bel Air, recently a hotbed of violence since the February ouster of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Amid clashes between police and Aristide supporters, burned and beheaded bodies began to appear in the streets near Dantica's church and home in September.

During a church service Oct. 24, police and U.N. peacekeepers climbed the stairs of Dantica's church and fired from a window at gangsters, his son said.

Gangsters blamed the Danticas for the incident, in which they said several people were killed, and in turn vandalized the church. Father and son fled, and flew off to Miami on Oct. 29.

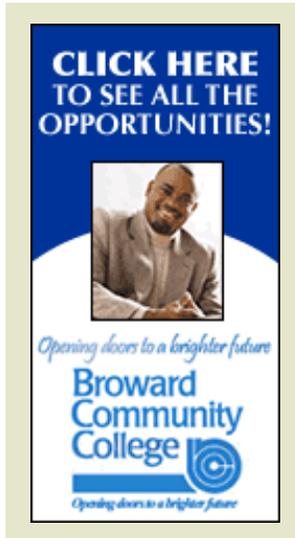
When they told U.S. Customs officials they were seeking asylum, the two were placed in an airport holding room for more than 20 hours before they were moved to Krome Detention Center.

U.S. officials and Dantica's lawyer, John Pratt, agree the 81-year-old appeared in good health at first, though he spoke through an artificial voice box, having had his larynx removed.

Maxo Dantica said he protested when officials took his father's briefcase, which included prescription pills and a rum bottle full of medicinal leaves.

"I said, 'If you take that from him he might die,' and they said, 'Well, he'll die then.' They were joking about it," he said. Officials later told the son they were giving Dantica a substitute for his medicine, but it was unclear what it was.

As Dantica was attending an asylum interview Nov. 1, he began vomiting and fell back in his chair, motionless, eyes open, DHS officials said.



Pratt, who was present, said a health worker was called in, but instead of trying to revive the pastor tried unsuccessfully to get him to speak.

Upon Pratt's insistence, officials brought in Dantica's son, who was shocked when he saw his father with vomit blocking the hole in his throat where he used the voice box.

"He wasn't talking because he was being asphyxiated," Maxo Dantica said. "I said, 'Don't lie him back!' But they wouldn't listen. Then they said I wasn't cooperating."

Officials took the younger Dantica away, and after two hours his father was taken to Jackson Memorial Hospital. Relatives were barred from calling or seeing him.

"I'm absolutely certain the detention induced his death," his niece, acclaimed novelist Edwidge Danticat, told The Associated Press.

She said in an op-ed article in The New York Times on Wednesday that her uncle was a victim "not just of the violence in Haiti, but also of the prejudice of American immigration officials."

U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, a Florida Democrat, demanded an independent investigation, saying "Haitians are treated at the same level as livestock coming into the U.S."

But Knocke said Dantica was treated fairly and according to procedure.

"There was nothing abnormal" in Dantica's case, he said. "We all have a time. Maybe it was his time."

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