

Family, activists seek answers in death of Haitian minister

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NEW YORK -- In the midst of her grief, renowned Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat described her "own personal nightmare" involving the uncle who raised her in Haiti and died this month in U.S. custody after arriving in Miami.

"It is my nightmare that he died alone handcuffed to a bed," she said during a telephone interview from Brooklyn, where the wake of her uncle, Joseph Dantica, was held Friday night.

Dantica, an 81-year-old minister, died Nov. 3, five days after he fled Port-au-Prince for Miami in fear for his life, applied for asylum, and was detained by federal authorities as they reviewed his case.

As Brooklyn's Haitian community grieved for her uncle, Danticat, her family and a group of Haitian activists reiterated calls for an investigation into his death.

"They're claiming the detention had nothing to do with his death, but unfortunately the evidence suggests otherwise," Jocelyn McCalla, executive director of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights, said in a telephone interview.

Russ Knocke, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security, called the death "horribly unfortunate and tragic" but said the agency was not responsible.

"His detention had no bearing whatsoever on his passing," Knocke said by telephone from Washington. Knocke said Dantica died of a pre-existing condition called pancreatitis, an inflammation of the pancreas.

Danticat, the author of the 1995 National Book Award finalist "Krik? Krak!," said she was skeptical of the government's explanation.

"They're claiming a pre-existing condition we never knew he had," she said. "It was a complete shock to us."

Danticat lived with her uncle in Haiti until she left for New York at age 12. She spells her name differently because of a clerical error on her father's birth certificate.

Danticat said her elderly uncle should not have been detained because he entered with a valid multiple-entry visa that had previously been accepted without problem. Knocke said he could not confirm that the visa was valid.

Danticat also said her uncle's blood-pressure medication had been seized and his family had not been permitted to see him.

Knocke said he was unaware of any confiscated medication. He said it is government policy that only a lawyer be permitted access to detainees pending a review for asylum.

Florida Congressman Kendrick Meek, a Democrat who represents parts of Miami-Dade and Broward counties, has also pressed for an inquiry into Dantica's death. Meek wrote to Homeland Security Secretary Thomas Ridge and Inspector General Clark Kent Ervin to ask for a probe.

Knocke said the calls for investigations were unlikely to be heeded. He said the case "would presumably be closed out" because the death has already been carefully reviewed.

Dantica and his son, Maxo, fled Haiti on Oct. 29 after their Port-au-Prince neighborhood descended into the chaos of gang warfare.

Dantica's church in the troubled Bel-Air community had become a battleground for police and opposing gangs and the minister and his

son were forced into hiding, McCalla said.

After immigration officials learned Dantica and his son intended to apply for asylum, the two were detained as their case was reviewed. They spent the night at the Miami International Airport before being transferred to the Krome Detention Center west of Miami.

While in custody, Dantica became ill and was taken to a hospital for treatment, where he later died.

A wake was held on Friday night at the Evangelical Crusade of Fishers of Men in Brooklyn, where two of Dantica's brothers live. A funeral was planned for Saturday.

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