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Preacher's death prompts protest

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The award-winning US writer Edwidge Danticat is leading calls for an inquiry into the death in custody of her uncle, an 81-year-old Baptist minister who fled Haiti to seek asylum in the US. Human rights groups say his death highlights a discriminatory asylum policy against Haitian refugees.

Joseph Dantica, whose funeral takes place in New York today, was detained at Miami airport on October 29 after requesting asylum, though he had a valid US visa. He died in custody five days later.

The authorities have been accused of refusing to waive powers of detention for an elderly man who spoke with an artificial voicebox after throat cancer, and was taking medicine for high blood pressure.

John Pratt, his lawyer at an asylum hearing on November 2, said Mr Dantica had complained his medicine had been taken away, and "three minutes into the hearing he started vomiting and fell back against the wall".

The lawyer said a medical officer had accused him of faking illness. He was taken to the infirmary at Krome detention centre then moved to hospital, where he died the next day. Even when he was in hospital his niece, who lives in Miami, was reportedly denied permission to see him.

She said: "Part of people's vulnerability is they think you're just a dumb immigrant, that you won't say anything. But we don't want this to happen to somebody else."

The homeland security department identified the cause of death as pancreatitis and said: "There is no connection between the pre-existing terminal medical condition he had and the process through which he entered the country."

It said Mr Dantica had not been carrying prescribed medication. His son, Maxo Dantica, must wait up to six weeks to see the autopsy report.

The New York-based Coalition for Haitian Rights also wants an investigation.

The preacher, founder of nine schools in Haiti, fled after armed gangs ransacked his church in Port-au-

Prince.

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