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TEARS, RAGE OVER HAITIAN REFUGEE WHO DIED IN FED JAIL

By **SAM GUSTIN** and **RICH CALDER**



November 21, 2004 -- Joseph Dantica thought he was cheating death by fleeing Haiti's vicious criminal gangs — but death caught up with the 81-year-old man in a Miami federal jail where he was awaiting a federal asylum hearing.

About 100 people gathered at Evangelical Crusade of Fishers of Men church in Flatbush, Brooklyn, yesterday to remember Dantica, a minister and educator. Some expressed outrage at the way he was treated before he died. "My father didn't have to die," said Dantica's son, Maxo. "He came here looking for freedom, and he found death."

When U.N. peacekeeping troops decided to use Dantica's church to stage a raid on Haitian gangs, Dantica and Maxo decided to leave for the United States.

They arrived in Miami with passports and valid visas — but when they told immigration officers they planned to apply for asylum, they were put in detention.

The elder Dantica died five days later, on Nov. 3. "His detention had no bearing whatsoever on his passing," a Department of Homeland Security spokesman said.

But his family says he was denied his blood pressure medicine, and Haitian community leaders are angrily demanding an investigation.

"It is my nightmare that he died alone handcuffed to a bed," said Dantica's niece, noted Haitian author Edwidge Danticat — who spells her name differently from her uncle. She lived with him until moving to Brooklyn at age 12.

"I lost the most important part of my life. I feel like life doesn't mean much anymore," said Maxo Dantica, who was released from detention after his father died. Joseph Dantica was buried at Cypress Hills Cemetery.

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