

Haitian women sue former strongman

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NEW YORK -- It's been more than a decade, but one woman can still hear the tiny voice that broke through the silence after she was brutally raped by paramilitary officers in Haiti. "Mom, did you die?" her young son asked her in the darkness. "Did you die?"

The mother survived the 1994 attack in Haiti to become a plaintiff in a lawsuit in Manhattan federal court against the soldiers' leader, Emmanuel "Toto" Constant, a former strongman who once boasted that voodoo and the CIA shielded him from trouble.

She and two other immigrants now living in the United States - who insist on anonymity out of fear of reprisals against their families in Haiti - claim Constant sanctioned systematic rape to silence dissent. The 40-year-old mother's story differs in one dramatic way: She bore the son of one of her attackers.

"I need to demand justice," she said about Constant in a recent telephone interview arranged by the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability. "I blame him personally for making my family live in misery."

Lawyers for the alleged gang-rape victims plan to ask a U.S. district court judge in the coming weeks to enter a default judgment against Constant, 47, because he's ignored the case since being served a complaint in January. That would open the door for a hearing to determine damages.

Constant has lived in exile in New York City since slipping into the United States in 1994. He reportedly sometimes stays at the home of an aunt and works for a mortgage broker. He did not respond to messages left at both locations; court records contain no name for a lawyer.

Despite a 1995 deportation order, Constant has been allowed to remain in the United States because Haiti's judicial system has never stabilized enough to ensure he would be treated fairly, said State Department spokesman Steve Pike.



Emmanuel "Toto" Constant, a former strongman who once boasted that voodoo and the CIA shielded him from trouble, gestures during a press conference in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in this file photo of Sept. 22, 1994. A lawsuit brought by three Haitian immigrants in Manhattan federal court against Constant - who now lives in the Queens borough of New York - claims he sanctioned systematic rape to silence dissent against a right-wing regime. (AP Photo/John McConnico, File) (John McConnico - AP)

"We'll continue to evaluate his status to determine when his removal to Haiti would be prudent," Pike said.

A 6-foot-4 son of a military officer, Constant emerged as the feared leader of a right-wing paramilitary group, the Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti, or FRAPH, after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's presidency was toppled in 1991. Human rights groups allege that between 1991 and 1994, FRAPH terrorized and slaughtered slum-dwellers loyal to Aristide.

Constant once boasted that he was a paid informant for the CIA. He also claimed he had the power of voodoo in him.

Speaking through an interpreter in Creole, the woman who was brutally beaten recounted her ordeal.

Her husband, a taxi driver, made the mistake of campaigning for Aristide's return, putting up posters of him on telephone poles around their impoverished neighborhood in the capital of Port-au-Prince. In 1992 he was arrested - then vanished forever.

Anguished, she stood outside her home, crying and cursing the military. She "wouldn't shut up about it," she said, until soldiers decided to retaliate.

There was a beating and a brief jailing. But the real horror began with a knock at her door on April 19, 1994. Five men entered, accosted her and took turns raping her in front of her three small children.

"I kept screaming, 'Why me? Why me?'" she recalled.

Three months later, the soldiers returned, again raping her and severely beating her 8-year-old son. The family fled to the hills above Port-au-Prince, where the woman fell ill. A doctor stunned her with the news she was pregnant.

"I thought if I have this baby, it would drive me mad," she said.

She considered an abortion. The doctor convinced her she was too sick to survive it. She had a healthy boy who blended into the family. But he now has questions about his father, and has a mother reluctant to answer them.

"He deserves to know and understand, but he's still too young to explain everything," she said.

Once Aristide was restored to power in 2001, the woman was able to visit the United States on a tourist visa. Yet another government overthrow in Haiti last year made returning too risky, so she applied for political asylum.

She wept when asked if she missed her children, now under the care of relatives in Haiti. Her thoughts are especially with the one born of brutality.

"I love my son, very, very much," she said. "He's no different to me than any of my others, except that I always pray a little bit harder for him."

On the Net:

Center for Justice and Accountability: <http://www.cja.org>