

AFRICAN GAINS ASYLUM AFTER 2-YEAR STRUGGLE

Daily News (New York)

August 20, 1999, Friday

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Section: News; Pg. 6

Length: 413 words

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Body

In her deepest despair, Adelaide Abankwah thought she might die in the Queens immigration jail where she was locked after she fled threats of genital mutilation in her West African homeland.

Yesterday, the Ghanaian woman celebrated the legal victory that won her asylum in the U.S. and announced plans for a new life of school and volunteer work.

"There are really no words that can describe the way I'm feeling today," Abankwah said in her first public appearance since winning her 28-month struggle. "I'm so happy to be free."

Abankwah fled to New York via Rome in 1997. Immigration agents at Kennedy Airport detained her when she landed with a forged Ghanaian passport and U.S. visa.

Abankwah sought asylum on the ground that she had been threatened with genital mutilation by her tribe for having engaged in premarital sex. "I would die if I went back home," she said yesterday.

Although the practice is outlawed in Ghana, genital mutilation is still practiced among some tribes, according to a U.S. State Department report. Up to 30% of all Ghanaian women have undergone the cutting, usually as a religious ritual, the report said.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service has accepted fear of genital mutilation as legal grounds for asylum applications since 1985. But an immigration judge ruled that Abankwah failed to prove she had "a well-founded fear" she would be cut if deported.

Abankwah said she suffered inside the INS lockup for more than two years while lawyers appealed the ruling.

A three-judge federal panel ruled last month that the immigration courts had held Abankwah to an unreasonably tough legal standard. Based on the ruling, the U.S. Board of Immigration Appeals granted her asylum last week.

Abankwah said she plans to attend Marymount Manhattan College and work as a volunteer for Amnesty Now, a human rights group that championed her cause.

"I will now begin to enjoy my time in America," she said before embracing feminist Gloria Steinem, one of many community leaders and politicians who supported her.

Still, the celebration wasn't universal. Kobina Sekyi, deputy ambassador of Ghana's embassy to the U.S., said the tribes in Abankwah's home region do not practice female genital mutilation for any reason, including punishment for premarital sex.

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"We don't begrudge her" for the asylum victory, said Sekyi. "But it's not necessary at all that Ghana be desecrated with completely untrue statements."

Graphic

HELAYNE SEIDMAN CELEBRATION Adelaide Abankwah smiles as she's hugged by her minister, Victoria Otumfuor-Neequaye, at Manhattan news conference yesterday announcing Abankwah was granted asylum in U.S. Abankwah feared genital mutilation in Ghana, her homeland.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (90%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (78%); APPEALS (78%); DEPORTATION (78%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); HUMAN RIGHTS (78%); LITIGATION (78%); FEMINISM & WOMEN'S RIGHTS (77%); HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS (77%); VOLUNTEERS (76%); STATE DEPARTMENTS & FOREIGN SERVICES (74%); EMBASSIES & CONSULATES (74%); WOMEN'S HEALTH (73%); DECISIONS & RULINGS (71%); JUDGES (70%); RELIGION (66%)

Company: US DEPARTMENT OF STATE (55%); US DEPARTMENT OF STATE (55%)

Organization: US DEPARTMENT OF STATE (55%); US DEPARTMENT OF STATE (55%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (79%); NEW YORK, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (95%); GHANA (94%); WESTERN AFRICA (79%)

Load-Date: August 20, 1999