

Associate Press

Obama aunt anguished by separation

By RODRIQUE NGOWI (AP) –

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BOSTON — President Barack Obama's aunt buried her face in her hands and sobbed as she described her anguish over no longer having contact with him and his family after the revelation she had been living illegally for years in the United States in public housing.

Zeituni Onyango (zay-TUH'-nee awn-YAHN'-goh) told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview that she is troubled that her immigration woes have made her a political liability to her nephew.

Onyango, the half sister of Obama's late father, said she has exiled herself from the family after attending Obama's inauguration because she didn't want to become fodder for his foes. Obama and his family have not reached out to her either, she said.

"Before, we were family. But right now, there is a lot of politics, and me, I am not interested in any politics at all," said Onyango, whose appeal for asylum from her native Kenya is before an immigration judge in Boston.

The Obamas are her only family in the United States, she said.

"It is very sad when such a thing happens. There are people, outsiders, you know, they come in between, they divide a family," she said last week. "It's not easy."

Onyango, 57, is protective of Obama and said she never asked him to intervene in her case and didn't tell him about her immigration difficulties.

"I carry my own cross," she said. "He has nothing to do with my problem."

The White House said Obama has had no involvement in his aunt's case and believes it should run its ordinary course.

Onyango helped care for the president's half brothers and sister while living with Barack Obama Sr. in Kenya. She moved to the United States in 2000 and applied for asylum in 2002, but her request was rejected and she was ordered deported in 2004.

However, she did not leave the country and continued to live in public housing in Boston. She had been a health care volunteer but not since her status became public. She refused to discuss how she affords to live now or who is paying for her attorney.

Onyango said she previously had no trouble visiting Obama when he was a state senator in Illinois or after he became a U.S. senator, though she declined to discuss details of how often she had contact with Obama and his family. Her tiny apartment in a modest subsidized public housing complex for seniors and the disabled is adorned with photographs of her with Obama at the Illinois Statehouse, the president's official portrait, his family, the inauguration, her children and African wildlife.

She is disabled and learning to walk again after being paralyzed for more than three months because of an autoimmune disorder called Guillain-Barre syndrome.

Her status as an illegal alien was revealed in October 2008, days before Obama was elected. Obama said he did not know his aunt was living in the U.S. illegally and said he believes the law should be followed.

A judge agreed to suspend Onyango's deportation order in December and reopened her asylum case. A hearing will be held in February, when Onyango can present her reasons for seeking asylum. The judge will then decide if she will be deported.

Her attorney, Margaret Wong, said Onyango first applied for asylum because of violence in Kenya, an East African nation fractured by cycles of electoral violence every five years. People who seek asylum must show that they face persecution in their homeland on the basis of religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a social group.

Immigration experts say Onyango's relationship to the president could strengthen her claim that she would be subjected to danger at home.

Onyango declined to discuss the details of her case, citing the pending appeal.

She became angry when discussing Obama's half brother who wrote a semi-autobiographical novel about the abusive Kenyan father he shares with the president. She called Mark Ndesandjo, who lives in China, an opportunist eager to capitalize on his famous brother.

Ndesandjo, who wrote "Nairobi to Shenzhen," did not grow up with Obama. He has said he wrote the book in part to raise awareness of domestic violence. But Onyango said she was Ndesandjo's baby sitter while living with his father and never witnessed any abuse.

"He was only strict and argumentative, motivating one to do the best," she said, acknowledging that in those days in Kenya, "It was politically correct to slap children to discipline them just as it was done elsewhere in the world."

She said Ndesandjo's claims against a man who died 27 years ago are unfair. The senior Obama had problems with alcohol and was difficult to live with sometimes because of his frustration over years of political persecution, but he wasn't a child abuser or wife beater, Onyango said.

She also denounced persistent allegations that Obama is not a natural-born American citizen, saying that she is angered by the "outrageous, absurd, calculated conspiratory claim" that he was born outside the United States and is ineligible to be president. She recalled receiving a letter and photos from Obama's father announcing his son's birth in Hawaii.

Onyango reserved special words of kindness for former President George W. Bush for a directive he put in place days before the election requiring federal agents get high-level approval to arrest fugitive immigrants, which directly affected Onyango. The directive made clear that U.S. officials worried about possible election implications of arresting Onyango.

She said she wants to thank Bush in person for the order, which gave her a measure of peace but was lifted weeks later.

"I loved President Bush," Onyango said while moving toward a framed photo of Bush and his wife standing with Barack and Michelle Obama at the White House on inauguration day. "He is my No. 1 man in my life because he helped me when I really needed that help."