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A murder plot international

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Threats to the judge and prosecutor and reports of terrified prosecution witnesses — all leading to what FBI agents call unprecedented security precautions — are marking preparations for a trial opening here Tuesday of four men for the murder of Chilean exile leader Orlando Letelier.

The prosecution is expected to present 70 witnesses who will unravel the background and planning for the murder plot, which is said to have originated within the inner circles of the Chilean military government headed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

The lead-off witness is expected to be Michael Moffitt, 27, a colleague of Letelier's at the Institute for Policy Studies, who was riding in Letelier's car on Sept. 21, 1976, when a bomb attached to its undercarriage exploded, taking the life of Moffitt's wife Ronnie as well as Letelier's.

Moffitt will tell the jury of 12 men and women from the District of Columbia how he and his wife, married only four months, borrowed Letelier's car the night before the assassination because their own was not working. They picked up Letelier on the morning of Sept. 21 at his home in suburban Bethesda, Md., and began the 20-minute drive to tragedy in the Dupont Circle area of the city.

According to FBI agents investigating the case, the powerful plastique charge had been attached to the Letelier car two days earlier by an agent of the Chilean secret police, an American expatriate by the name of Michael Vernon Townley.

Townley was arrested and turned over to US authorities in Chile last April after photos of him appeared in a Santiago newspaper. In Washington, he quickly confessed to carrying out the plot with a team of right-wing Cuban exile terrorists he had recruited, and entered a guilty plea in exchange for a reduced sentence.

Investigative sources say that Townley has told them he had directed the Cubans to kill Letelier on the morning of Sept. 20 just over

Instead, the Cubans reportedly failed to pick up Letelier's car from their stationing point, the parking lot of a Roy Rogers sandwich shop in Bethesda that morning. The next day, however, they caught up to Letelier as he and the Moffitts drove through the fashionable Embassy Row section of Washington. The bomb was set off by remote control radio.

"I heard the sound of water dripping on a hot wire," Moffitt recalled, "and then saw a flash." The powerful explosion ripped up from under Letelier's seat, instantly killing him. A sliver of metal pierced Ronni Moffitt's throat, fatally wounding her.

Twenty months later, after an exhaustive investigation ranging across four continents and involving the cooperation of at least five agencies of the US government, eight persons were indicted in the murders.

Chief among them was Manuel Contreras, head of Chile's secret police (DINA) at the time of the murders, and two other senior secret police officers. So far, Chilean authorities have refused to hand them over to stand trial here.

Three of the Cubans indicted in the alleged plot, members of the militantly anticommunist, New Jersey-based Cuban Nationalist Movement, have been arrested and will stand trial. Two more Cubans have been indicted but remain at large.

Government testimony in the first stages of the trial will attempt to map out the origins of the murder plot in Santiago in the summer of 1976, the assignment of the mission to Townley, the recruitment of the Cubans, and the surveillance of Letelier's movements around Washington by additional agents of the Chilean secret police.

Much of the government's case will depend on Michael Townley, the son of a Ford Motor Company executive, who lived in Chile for most of his 35 years. During the tenure of the socialist Allende government from 1970 to '73, Townley participated in underground terrorist activities with an extreme right-wing anti-Allende organization called "Fatherland and Liberty."

While Townley was in the inner circles in Miami during a short stay there in 1973, he was selected for the Letelier murder mission. The Cubans were recruited, according to Townley and other potential witnesses, with offers of an exchange for Chilean aid for their campaign against Fidel Castro.

Although most Cuban exile groups have entered into a new era of friendliness with Castro over the recent release of political prisoners, some groups have maintained a hostile stance. In Miami recently, the airwaves have been filled with appeals for defense funds for the Cubans indicted in the Letelier case.

For the past few months, the Cubans' defense team has sought to pry loose any evidence of CIA complicity in the Letelier case, apparently hoping to force the government to retreat from its charges on national security grounds.

So far, CIA affidavits have revealed only that the CIA had contact with Townley on at least three occasions, and at one point, expressed an interest in recruiting him as an agent.

On Nov. 25, 1970, Townley called up the CIA's Miami field office "to offer his services to the agency," one affidavit states.

The following February, "preliminary security approval" was granted "to use Mr. Townley in an operational capacity," but according to another affidavit, "subsequent efforts to re-establish contacts... in 1971 were unsuccessful, and on Dec. 21, 1971, the Office of Security was informed there was no longer any operational interest in Mr. Townley."

In June 1973, Townley again called the Miami CIA office "to notify agency of his presence in the US in the event it desired to debrief him. He claimed while in Chile he had tried unsuccessfully to contact CIA," the affidavit states.

"On 18 June 1973, Mr. Townley again telephoned the overt agency representative in Miami. He was told that the agency had no questions for him, but would be