

# Witness: Cubans boasted of killing Letelier

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By ROMAN CZAJKOWSKY

*Dispatch Washington Bureau*

WASHINGTON—A self-confessed convict and paid FBI informant testified yesterday that Cuban exiles bragged to him about their role in the car-bombing murder of former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier.

In some of the most stunning testimony presented so far in the three-week-old trial here of three Cuban defendants charged in connection with the case, Ricardo Canete of New York City quoted one indicted Cuban who is still a fugitive as telling him: "Look, we did it. They (government investigators) know it, we know it. But let them prove it."

Speaking in a matter-of-fact, almost flippant tone, Canete, who said he had once been active in the New Jersey-based anti-Castro movement the defendants belong to, described how the FBI was paying him cash totaling \$2,000 between May 1977 and April 1978, while the Cubans were informing him about the Letelier plot.

Canete's revelations, however, appeared to contradict earlier testimony by a key government witness, and both the defendants—Guillermo and Ignacio Novo and Alvin Ross—and defense attorneys appeared amused as the Cuban witness held forth.

Under questioning by Assistant U.S. Attorney Lawrence Barcella, Canete at one point quoted Ross as telling him that he "made Letelier's bomb." But Michael Townley, the former Chilean secret

police agent who has admitted placing the bomb under Letelier's car, has already told the jury that not Ross but another Cuban helped assemble the bomb.

The government contends that DINA, Chile's secret police, arranged Letelier's 1976 murder with the help of the Union City-based Cuban Nationalist Movement to silence the former Chilean envoy's strident criticism of Chile's military junta. Letelier was a Chilean ambassador to the United States under the Marxist regime of President Salvador Allende, who was killed when overthrown by the rightist junta in 1973.

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Canete's contradictory statement, however, his role as paid informant and his criminal record—he admitted pleading guilty to charges of grand larceny and possession of counterfeit notes in the early 1970s—is expected to give the defense an opening to discredit him.

The Cuban witness signed a formal agreement with the government in the fall of 1977 to cooperate in the Letelier investigation. In return, the government promised it would not prosecute him on pending interstate theft charges.

Canete, 36, said he was born in Havana, Cuba, leaving in 1948 for the U.S., where he became involved in the Cuban Nationalist Association, precursor to the CNM, in the early 1960s.

Canete said it was then that he first met the Novo brothers, but added that he lost touch with them until May 1977, when he encountered Ignacio while looking for a job.

They met in a Union City bar, where Canete said

he offered to supply the Cubans various false identification forms. Canete said Novo agreed because "the government was trying to lay the Letelier thing" on him and he might need the passports to get out of the country.

About a month later, Canete continued, Novo told him he was leaving for the Miami area, but that Canete should contact Ross about the documents.

Canete said he met Ross in Manhattan July 7. While driving with Ross in the latter's car, Canete said he saw an open briefcase on the front seat containing two folders, one marked "Orlando Letelier" and the other "Chile."

Later that day and after several drinks, Canete said, Ross "bragged about his work...making bombs. He informed me he once made a bomb out of a coffee pot." It was then that Ross said that he made "Letelier's bomb," Canete said.

Ross, however, denied placing the bomb himself, claiming instead that two members of Brigade 2506, a group of Cuban Bay of Pigs veterans, were "the ones who had done the job," Canete said.

The government contends that CNM members Virgilio Paz or Jose Dionisio Suarez triggered the remote-control bomb that shattered Letelier's car. The blast killed Letelier and an aide, Ronni K. Moffit, as they were driving to work along Washington's Embassy Row on Sept. 21, 1976.

Both Paz and Suarez have been charged with murder but are still at large.

Canete again met with the CNM in March of 1978 when, he said, he went to Union City "to get in touch with the CNM because I had broken off all contacts."

Canete said he then met Paz, whom he told about a pending subpoena to testify before a grand jury probing the Letelier murder.

It was at a meeting with Paz and Ross in a Union City restaurant, the Bottom of the Barrel, that both Cubans then talked freely about the murder plot, Canete said.

Asked by the prosecutor, Barrella, whether the Cubans explained why they had killed Letelier, Canete said Ross told him: "We had to show other countries that we could do it."