

Letelier trial witness ends his testimony

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WASHINGTON—As he concluded his testimony yesterday after four days on the stand, star prosecution witness Michael Vernon Townley admitted again that he had lied in 1978 to a Chilean general about his role in the Letelier-Moffitt slayings. But he insisted that he was telling the truth now.

Townley was testifying in the trial of Guillermo Novo Sampol and Alvin Ross Diaz, both of Union City, for the 1976 slayings of former Chilean ambassador to the U.S. Orlando Letelier and coworker Ronnie Karpen Moffitt here.

"Just like you're looking me in the eye right now, you looked him in the eye and lied right at him. Isn't that correct?" defense lawyer Lawrence Dubin asked Townley yesterday in reference to a signed statement he had made to Hector Orozco, the chief of Chilean military intelligence, who was looking into the plot.

"That is correct, sir," Townley responded. Townley said the statement was part of a coverup that had been ordered by his superior in the DINA — the Chilean secret police.

Asked later whether his plea-bargaining agreement with the U.S. attorney might be jeopardized if he lied on the stand during the current trial, Townley said it would, but added, "I am telling the truth here and now at this trial."

As the government's key witness, Townley's detailed testimony is the backbone of the government's case and his credibility is paramount to the case.

An exceptionally articulate and intellectually quick individual, Townley has defied most defense attempts to trip him up on his testimony. He often has shown that his memory apparently is better than that of the defense attorneys as he points out minor inconsistencies in their recollections of earlier testimony.

He has had to acknowledge, however, that he made the false statement to Orozco and another false declaration he made that was published in Chile's leading newspaper, El Mercurio, in 1978 as news of the U.S. investigation of the alleged conspiracy began to leak in Chile.

Although the defense has tried to make the most of these declarations, Townley has been able to explain away as normal lapses in memory most of the other discrepancies raised by the defense involving his grand jury testimony, statement to FBI agents and testimony at the 1979 and the current trial.

The acknowledgment of the false statement to Orozco also was made at the last trial, in early 1979, at which Novo and Ross were convicted of conspiracy in the killings.

Townley also stated again yesterday that he had had contact with Alvin Ross on only three occasions and that at no time was he aware of anything Ross actually had done to help in the assassination plot.

He said he first saw Ross at a meeting at the Chateau Renaissance motel in North Bergen, where Townley said Novo had brought together the local leaders of the Cuban Nationalist Movement to listen to Townley propose that the group help him kill Letelier. The witness said he had only an "inconsequential" conversation with Ross at the bar.

Townley said he met Ross formally later the same night at the Bottom of the Barrel restaurant on Bergenline Avenue in Union City on the night of Sept. 10-11, 1976, two days after Townley arrived in the United States to carry out the Letelier plot.

Of Ross' participation in the meeting, Townley said, "I have no specific recollection of specific words of his."

Townley testified that the Chateau Renaissance meeting had no conclusion except that the leaders had said they would "get back to me."

Townley said, however, that on the following morning, he conferred with Novo and Virgilio Paz, another Cuban associated with the CNM. At that meeting, which took place in a car, Townley said Novo told him that the CNM had agreed to help.

Letelier was a leader of the worldwide political movement opposing the regime of Augusto Pinochet, who seized power from Salvador Allende in a coup in 1973. Letelier was killed when a bomb exploded beneath the driver's seat of his car on Sept. 21, 1976 — 10 days after the alleged Chateau Renaissance meeting.