

Chile Bars Extradition to U.S. Of Letelier Murder Suspects

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP)—The head of the Chilean Supreme Court refused Monday to grant the extradition of three former secret police officials sought by the United States in the 1976 murder in Washington of Orlando Letelier, former Chilean ambassador.

Israeli Borquez, court president, said the evidence submitted by the U.S. Justice Department was not sufficient because it was based on a "paid accusation"—a reference to plea-bargaining between U.S. prosecutors and an American, Michael Townley, who has confessed to leading the murder mission. Townley was given a light sentence in exchange for his testimony.

Gen. Juan Manuel Contreras, one of the three secret police officials accused of ordering the assassination, said he was happy with the ruling. But in Washington, E. Lawrence Barcella, a federal prosecutor, called the decision "extremely disappointing" and said the U.S. government planned to appeal to a Supreme Court panel in Chile.

There was even stronger reaction from two Senate liberals, Sens. Frank Church of Idaho, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, who asked President Jimmy Carter to recall America's ambassador and to consider suspending aid to Chile.

Chile's legal system allows the head of the Supreme Court to act as both

judge and jury in extradition cases. But his decision is subject to automatic appeal to a panel of five associate justices.

"The last word has not been said in this case," said Alfredo Etcheberry, the Chilean lawyer who represents the United States.

What the United States wanted was the extradition of Contreras, former chief of the police unit known as DINA; Col. Pedro Espinoza Bravo, former DINA chief of operations; and Capt. Armando Fernandez Larios, an agent at the time of Letelier's death in 1976.

Letelier, a former cabinet minister and diplomat in the Socialist government of the late Salvador Allende, was blown to pieces by a remote-control bomb planted under his car in Washington, where he lived in exile. An American co-worker, Ronni Moffitt, also died in the blast and her husband, Michael, was injured.

Contreras was indicted in August by a Washington grand jury, which charged him with ordering the killing of Letelier. Espinoza and Fernandez also were indicted for murder; five Cuban exiles were indicted as well, four of them for murder.

Townley, who lived for many years in Chile and says he worked for the DINA, was turned over to the U.S. Justice Department. He was the star witness last January in the trial in Washington of three of the Cubans, and two were convicted of murder. Two more are being sought.