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Letelier Jury Selection Hindered; Prospects Familiar With Case

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WASHINGTON — Selection of a jury to try three Cuban exiles in the assassination case of former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier bogged down Wednesday as potential jurors said they knew about the event.

Of 125 persons available for jury duty, 85 said they had either read of, or heard about, the assassination by bomb that occurred more than two years ago on fashionable Embassy Row here.

Fifty-five of them told Judge Barington Parker Jr. that their knowledge extended beyond a simple awareness of the killing, which was reported around the world.

LETELIER, a one-time member of the Marxist Chilean government of Salvador Allende, who was overthrown in a 1973 military coup, died when a bomb attached to the chassis of his car exploded as he drove to work at the Institute for International Policy Studies.

A young assistant, Ronni K. Moffitt, also died in the explosion.

Justice Department prosecutors have alleged that the bombing was ordered by DINA, the Chilean secret police and carried out by Cuban exiles under the direction of DINA agent Michael Townley, an American expatriate.

Townley, who has pleaded guilty to a lesser charge, is the government's key witness.

Two of the three Cubans on trial are charged with assisting Townley in the bombing. They are Guillermo Novo Sampol and Alvin Ross Diaz, both of Union City, N.J.

The third, Ignacio Novo Sampol — brother of Guillermo — is charged with withholding knowledge of the assassination plot and of lying to a federal grand jury investigating Letelier's death. Ignacio Novo lives in Miami.

TWO OTHER Cuban militants and three high-ranking DINA officials in Chile also were named in the murder indictment. However, the two Cubans so far have eluded a worldwide manhunt and the three Chilean agents have not been extradited by their government.

Judge Parker spent the day Wednesday questioning each of the 55 jury panelists who professed knowledge of the crime to determine if that knowledge would prejudice their decision as jurors.

His questioning is expected to continue through today.

Only one juror was dismissed Wednesday, however, and he admitted knowing Letelier personally. He was not identified by the court.

The questioning was done in Parker's chambers without any reporters present. One participant in the proceeding said only a few of the almost three dozen questioned during the day showed an awareness of the international implications of the crime.

"IT WAS a horrible crime," the participant said. "Here a guy has his legs blown off and a young girl dies by choking to death on her own blood.

"It was sensational news. But that's about all they know of it."

Prospective jurors also are being asked if they are familiar with the

CIA's activities in Chile between 1966 and 1973. For the last three years of that period, the CIA has admitted participating in actions to undermine the Marxist administration of Allende.

A key defense strategy will be an attempt to show that Townley was a double-agent — acting for both the CIA and DINA — and carried out the assassination himself.

Townley has admitted placing the bomb, but said he was doing it on orders from the head of DINA in Chile.

That defense theory may have received a boost Wednesday. The Washington Star, quoting unnamed sources, said Townley had been cleared — but never used — by the CIA as an operative in Chile.

IN AN AFFIDAVIT filed last month, the CIA admitted that Townley had approached the agency office in Miami on three occasions, in 1970 and in 1973, offering his assistance. Those offers were not accepted, the affidavit said.

Security surrounding the trial is extraordinarily rigid. At one point late Tuesday, bomb-sniffing dogs were taken into a bathroom near Judge Parker's courtroom because guards found a sticker with the name Omega 7 on it.

Omega 7 is a secret Cuban exile terrorist group that has claimed credit for several bombings in New York and Miami, including some that have caused deaths.

The judge and prosecutor Eugene Propper also have been placed under 24-hour guard because of alleged death threats.