

# Townley Testifies He Feared Being Killed by His Ex-Boss

By TOM FIEDLER  
Herald Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Political assassin Michael Townley cooperated with federal officials investigating the bombing murder of Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier partly because he feared that his former Chilean secret police boss might kill him to keep him silent, Townley said Thursday.



TOWNLEY

out the Letelier assassination with help from radical Cuban exiles — three of whom are on trial in federal court here — under orders from the Chilean secret-police agency, DINA.

Letelier, a Chilean exile and former ambassador to the United States, died on Sept. 21, 1976, when a bomb strapped beneath his car exploded on Washington's embassy row.

Townley, 36, has become the government's key witness after pleading guilty to a lesser charge than murder and receiving a promise of federal protection for his family and himself. He is serving a 10- to 25-year sentence for conspiracy to murder Letelier but will be eligible for parole after three years and four months in prison.

Townley testified Thursday for the first time that he sought a promise of protection because he feared that Gen. Manuel Contreras Sepulveda — his former boss at DINA and the man who allegedly directed him to kill Letelier — also would have him killed.

The admission came when Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene Propper asked Townley about earlier testimony in which he said that he, Contreras and another DINA agent had planned a "coverup" to divert suspicion from the agency.

An alibi was worked out only days before Townley was to be called before a Chilean special prosecutor for questioning about his role in the Letelier murder.

When that alibi failed to deter U.S. diplomatic efforts to extradite Townley, Contreras ordered Townley to go into hiding in southern Chile. Townley, however, ignored the order.

When prosecutor Propper asked Townley why he had followed Contreras' orders to kill Letelier but refused the one to go to southern

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Chile, Townley replied:

"I was worried about my own safety, quite frankly," Townley said, adding that he realized "one of the easiest ways [to get me] to comply with a coverup would be for me to disappear."

**PROSECUTORS CONFIRMED** later that, by the word "disappear," Townley meant that he feared being killed.

He also said that fear made him insist on federal protection for himself and his family before he would sign a plea-bargaining agreement and cooperate with the government.

"I knew that, once I cooperated with the U.S. government, I would be a marked man afterwards," he said.

In a related development, sources close to Townley also said that he agreed to implicate his alleged Cuban co-conspirators after two of them — Alvin Ross Diaz and Guillermo Novo Sampol — were arrested in Miami on other charges last April 14.

**WHEN TOWNLEY** was brought back to the United States as a material witness five days earlier, his attorneys reportedly told him that federal investigators had little evidence to link him directly to the killing, the source said.

After Novo and Ross were arrested in Miami, however, Townley became concerned that, in exchange for lighter sentences, they would turn on him and detail his role in arranging the Letelier murder. As a result, he would be tried as the assassin and be subjected to a possible life sentence.

After consulting with his attorneys, Townley concluded that the only way he could protect himself against the murder charges would be to cooperate with federal investigators before the alleged Cuban co-conspirators did, the source said.

Two days after the Novo and Ross arrests, Townley began talking to FBI agents about his role in the Letelier murder.

The following day, he also told a

representative of the present Chilean government about DINA's role in the assassination plot and was given permission to testify fully about it.

By that time, DINA had been dissolved and Contreras, its former head, had retired. Townley said Thursday the Chilean representative assured him that Chile wanted "to get to the bottom of matters" and wanted to have "all parties involved brought to justice."

He said that assurance released him from his vows of secrecy as a DINA agent and enabled him to cooperate with the United States.