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Trial of 3 Cubans In Letelier Slaying To Begin Tuesday

WASHINGTON — (AP) — Three anti-Castro Cubans go on trial Tuesday for their alleged roles in the assassination of Orlando Letelier, a former Chilean diplomat and cabinet minister killed when a bomb exploded under his car on Washington's Embassy Row.

The case has the trappings of an international spy novel, including supposed CIA involvement, Chilean secret agents, anti-Castro extremism and a nationwide manhunt for fugitives.

Letelier was Chile's ambassador to the United States from 1971 to 1973 and then was foreign minister and defense minister under Marxist President Salvador Allende. After a 1973 military coup in which Allende died, the former ambassador became a vocal critic of the ruling junta.

On Sept. 21, 1976, the 44-year-old Letelier was driving to his job at the Institute for Policy Studies. Two co-workers — Michael and Ronni Moffitt — were riding with him as the car rounded Sheridan Circle on Embassy Row.

An explosion ripped through the floorboards of Letelier's 1975 Chevrolet, killing him instantly. Mrs. Moffitt, 25, staggered from the front passenger seat of the burning car, but died within seconds. Her husband suffered slight injuries.

THE THREE Cubans on trial — Guillermo Novo Sampol, his brother, Ignacio Novo Sampol, and Alvin Ross Díaz — have pleaded innocent. They are among eight indicted in the murder.

Missing at the trial will be the former director and two other officials of Chile's now-dismantled intelligence agency, DINA, who are accused in the indictment of hatching the scheme. The United States has asked Chile to extradite them, and a Chilean Supreme Court justice is questioning the three prior to ruling on the request.



G.N. SAMPOL



I.N. SAMPOL



DIAZ

The government says two other anti-Castro Cubans, Virgilio Paz Romero and José Dionisio Suárez Esquivel, also helped carry out the murder, but the two are fugitives.

"Nearly every field office of the FBI is intensely trying to find these individuals, and we are making every effort to locate them," government prosecutor E. Lawrence Barcella Jr. told District Judge Barrington Parker during a preliminary hearing.

THE MAN who admits planting the bomb, Michael Vernon Townley, will be in court as the government's heavily guarded chief witness. Defense attorneys say their case largely will hinge on their ability to discredit his testimony.

Townley, an American-born DINA agent, made a deal with the U.S. government in return for his testimony. He pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to murder a foreign official and was sentenced to 10 years in prison with parole possible after 40 months.

The government said it would recommend parole at that time if he cooperates fully.

"He [Townley] got a hell of a good deal, since he pulled the trigger on Letelier," said defense lawyer Paul Goldberger.