

U.S. Studies Possible Chilean Role in Exile's Killing

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 22—Justice Department investigators are pursuing the "possibility" that high officials in the Chilean Government were involved in planning the assassination of former Chilean Ambassador Orlando Letelier here 17 months ago.

But Justice Department sources were quick to say today that they had "no evidence" now to implicate the Chilean Government directly in the unsolved murder of Mr. Letelier, who was an official in the leftist government of President Salvador Allende Gossens.

The first indication that the department may finally have developed a lead on who assassinated the exiled Chilean came when the Justice Department made public yesterday a request it had made to the Chilean Government of President Augusto Pinochet to produce two lower-ranking military officers for questioning.

A Government spokesman said that the two men, believed to be Chilean secret police agents, "may have knowledge and information concerning who was responsible for the murders" of Mr. Letelier and Ronni Moffitt, who were killed when a bomb exploded under the car in which they were riding.

Allende Killed in Coup

Mr. Letelier was a foreign minister in the Marxist government of President Allende, who was killed in a military coup in 1973. A rightist military junta assumed control of the country in the coup. Since then, two former foreign ministers have been assassinated and another has been shot and paralyzed.

The United States request to the Chilean Government asked that the Chilean judiciary question the two military officers with a United States official present.

"I made clear that in making this request we were not accusing the Chilean Government of involvement in the matter," said Deputy Secretary of State War-

ren M. Christopher. "The request did not imply any presumption of guilt."

Mr. Christopher emphasized the gravity with which the United States viewed the request to Chile, which came from the second highest ranking official in the State Department, and expressed "the strong desire that the Chilean Government cooperate with us."

State Department Suspicions

State Department officials who declined to be identified said investigators felt that high officials in the Chilean Government had knowledge of the assassination plans if they were not actually behind them.

Officials at the State Department said that the matter of sending the request came to the higher levels of the department last week.

The Justice Department investigation has relied heavily on informants in Cuban communities in Miami and elsewhere, sources said.

Mr. Letelier was killed on the morning of Sept. 21, 1976, as his car rounded a traffic circle in downtown Washington on his way to work at the Institute for Policy Studies. Mrs. Moffitt, the other victim, was a staff member of the institute. Her husband, who also was a passenger, was injured slightly.

Chile Denied Involvement

Because of Mr. Letelier's close association with the Allende government—he had served as ambassador to the United States for nearly three years as well as having been foreign minister briefly—his friends were quick to blame the present Chilean Government's secret police for his death. The Chilean Government denied any involvement.

Mr. Letelier was arrested the day of the military coup in Chile in September 1973 and was imprisoned on Dawson Island, a bleak encampment off Chile's southern coast, in the Straits of Magellan just above Antarctica. No charges were placed against him.

He was released after a year and came

to Washington to become a visiting professor at American University and director of the Transnational Institute of the Institute for Policy Studies. The institute is a private political-research organization with a somewhat left-wing outlook.

In exile here, Mr. Letelier quickly became a symbol of Chilean opposition to the authoritarian Pinochet regime, and he continued his outspoken criticism. Shortly before his death, the Chilean Government deprived him of his citizenship.

Had Wife and Four Sons

Mr. Letelier, who was 44 years old when he died, left a wife and four sons.

Some months after his death, leaked information about the contents of his briefcase appeared in several newspaper columns, including those written by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak and by Jack Anderson. Among the contents, according to the columnists, were indications that Mr. Letelier had been receiving funds from the Cuban Government of President Fidel Castro. Mr. Letelier's associates and family, who opened the briefcase to the press later, maintained that the alleged "Cuban connection" was not the Cuban Government but Beatriz Allende, the daughter of the late Chilean president. She reportedly committed suicide in Havana last October.

Newspaper reports of the Justice Department investigation into Mr. Letelier's death have focused on anti-Castro Cuban groups and individuals, hostile to Dr. Allende because of their political views. The Cuban exiles, it was reported last fall, were considered likely to have carried out the assassination at the direction of the Chilean secret police.

The complex investigation has led all over the United States and outside the country. Although it was being conducted largely by the F.B.I., the Central Intelligence Agency also has played a role, as has the Justice Department. A grand jury heard several witness, including 10 Cuban exiles, but took no action.