

Suspect arrested in killing of diplomat

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BOYNTON BEACH — The last man sought in the 1976 bombing assassination of former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier and an aide was arrested Tuesday by the FBI as he drove to his landscaping business.

William Gavin, special agent in charge of the FBI's Miami Division, said the man, Virgilio Paz-Romero, 39, pushed the button that detonated the high-powered, remote-controlled explosive, killing Letelier and Ronni Karpen Moffitt on Sept. 21, 1976, as they rode in a car on Embassy Row in Washington.

"Over the years, we've gotten tips that he was in the Caribbean or South America," Gavin said.



Letelier

The arrest came after a viewer of the television show "America's Most Wanted" called U.S. Customs, Gavin said. The show ran a story Friday night about the 15-year search for Paz.

Paz was indicted in 1978 on charges of conspiracy to murder a foreign official, unlawful making of destructive devices and unlawful storage of explosives.

"He's been on our fugitive roll for years, and we've been actively searching for him as we have for other fugitives," Gavin said. "As it happens, sometimes they're right in your own back yard."

Gavin said Paz told agents that he has owned Green Heart Landscaping in this Palm Beach County city since 1985 and that he has been in South Florida since 1980.

Agents arrested him without incident as he drove to his landscaping business in his pickup truck.

The bombing severely strained relations between Chile

and the United States for years.

It wasn't until last year that President Bush agreed to normalize contact between the two countries, lifting sanctions imposed after the government of former Chilean President Gen. Augusto Pinochet was implicated in the assassination.

Bush made the decision after newly elected President Patricio Aylwin said Chile would cooperate fully with the investigation.

Letelier was foreign minister and ambassador to the United States under President Salvador Allende, who was overthrown by the military led by Pinochet in 1973. Letelier later became an outspoken critic of Pinochet.

Paz was one of six men wanted in the murders. Last April, Jose Dionisio Suarez was arrested in St. Petersburg; he pleaded guilty in September to conspiring to kill Letelier. Three have been convicted, and two were acquitted.