

INS Releases Cuban Car-Bomber

U.S. POSITION ON CUBA PREVENTS DEPORTATION

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TAMPA — The convicted assassin of the former Chilean Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier and an American in a 1976 car bombing in Washington's Embassy Row was freed Tuesday.

Jose Dionisio Suarez Esquivel, 62, spent nearly four years in the custody of the Immigration and

Naturalization Service after he served seven years in federal prison. He walked out of the INS Bradenton Detention Center on Tuesday afternoon.

A Cuban exile, Suarez was a fugitive before he was arrested in St. Petersburg in 1990. When his prison sentence was up in 1997 he was handed over to the INS, which deports convicted aliens to their country of citizenship.

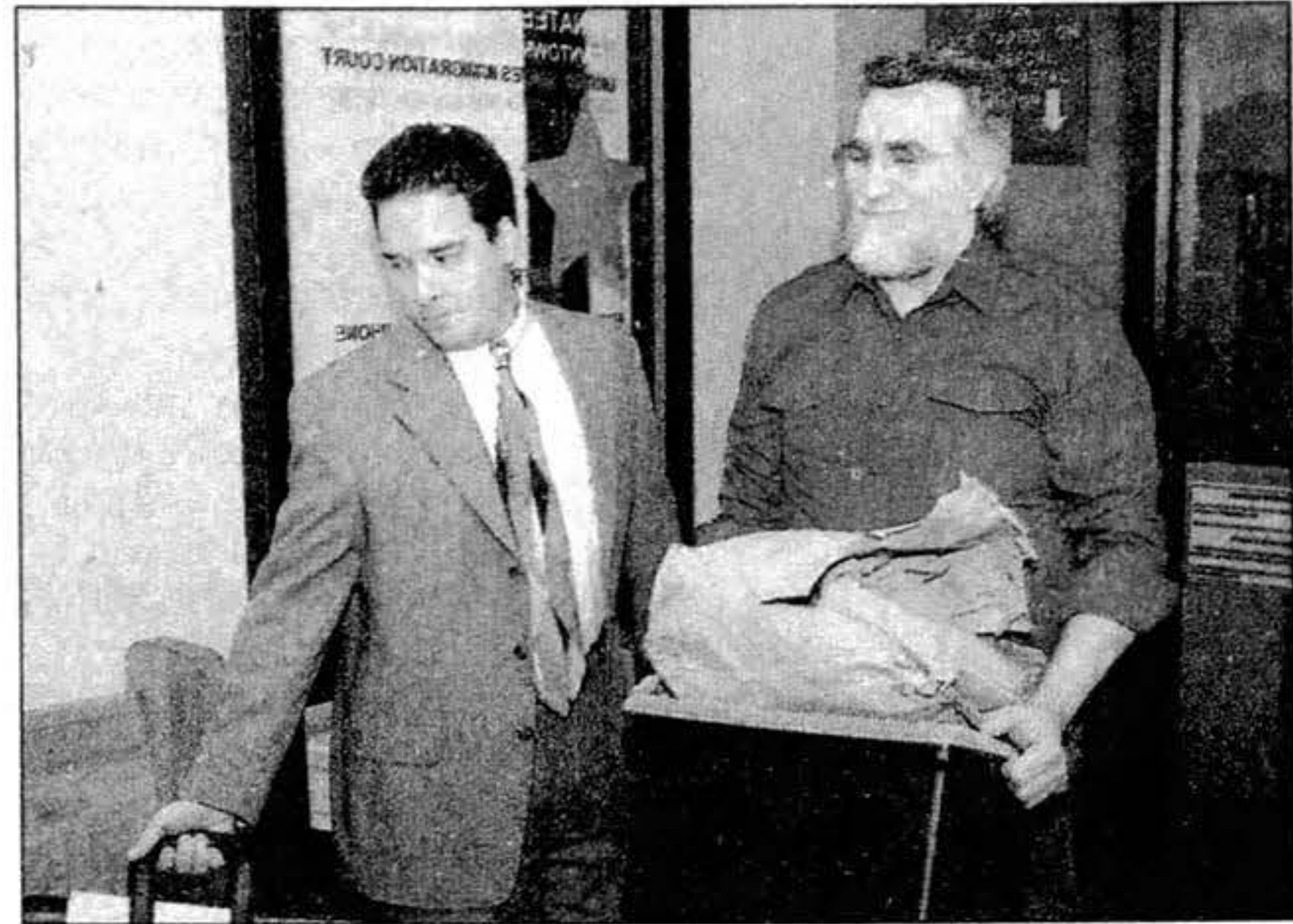
But the United States has no official diplomatic ties with Cuba, so the INS could not deport Suarez to Cuba. Instead it held

him indefinitely.

But this year the U.S. Supreme Court found the INS policy of detaining inmates indefinitely to be unconstitutional. An immigration judge ordered Suarez's release Thursday. Virgilio Paz Romero, 49, a conspirator with Suarez, was freed in July.

Both men are still under a deportation order, said Rodney Germain, a spokesman for the INS. They could be removed if the United States restores ties

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The victims' families are dismayed.



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Jose Dionisio Suarez Esquivel, right, leaves the INS Bradenton Detention Facility on Tuesday with attorney Dario Diaz.

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with Cuba. Meanwhile, Suarez has to report to the INS once a month.

In the Tampa office of his attorney, Ralph Fernandez, Suarez said he is sorry "especially for this girl." He was referring to Ronni Moffitt, the 25-year-old American who was also killed in a car bombing.

One of his attorneys, Dario Diaz, interrupted to say Suarez admits no guilt for the crime: "He's sorry in a humanitarian way — the same way we're sorry for Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi."

Nodding, Suarez said, "I never killed nobody."

However, the Cuban exile pleaded guilty to charges of killing a foreign official and struck a deal with a federal prosecutor resulting in a 12-year sentence. With prison incentives for good behavior, he served seven years.

Suarez said he pleaded guilty to prevent his wife from being arrested.

He said his English was not good enough to express how he feels about being free but has always felt calm and peaceful. He said he wants to meet Letelier's son to explain the truth about the "labyrinth that goes back to 1976."

Sam Bussoni, a Washington attorney for the victims' families, said Suarez should explain it all to a grand jury under oath.

Suarez said he was not going to "look for a job in a factory at this age" but will "wait for the offers his friends will come up with."

A lieutenant in Fidel Castro's army, Suarez defected to the United States a year after the 1959 revolution and took part in the Bay of Pigs Invasion. He is considered a material witness against former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, but he said he would never testify against Pinochet. He offered to do so against Castro.

"Pinochet saved Chile from terrible communism," he said. "I have absolutely nothing to say about Mr. Pinochet."

"It's lamentable that he'd withhold the information," said Stacie Jonas, director of the Pinochet Project at the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies, where Letelier and Moffitt once worked.

She said the institute hopes Pinochet will be held accountable for ordering the crime.

The victims' families said they were dismayed by the release of Paz Romero and Suarez.

"It appears that the price of life is very cheap," said Murray Karpen, Moffitt's father. "People like Suarez were released from jail after having committed premeditated murder."

He said he and his wife are not over the murder of their daughter. "Somewhere along the line, you've got to keep this alive," Karpen said. "You have to stop dictators from committing murders."

"My husband was killed in a cold-blooded assassination, and people who did it are free," Isabel Letelier said in a telephone interview from Santiago, Chile. "These people are very dangerous," she said, "and I don't know if being in jail has made them better."

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