

Assassins' Trail

The U.S. names seven killers

"Something has happened in the District of Columbia." Two days after receiving this cryptic phone message from an accomplice, Michael Townley, 33, an American-born agent of Chile's secret police (DINA), flew home to Santiago from Miami, his mission accomplished. It was to assassinate Orlando Letelier, 42, a self-exiled former Chilean ambassador and eloquent critic of the military junta headed by General Augusto Pinochet. Letelier was killed in Washington on Sept. 21, 1976, by a remote-controlled bomb planted in his blue Chevelle; killed with him was an American aide, Ronni Moffit.

Last week a 22-month Justice Department investigation of the slayings ended when a federal grand jury indicted General Manuel Contreras Sepúlveda, a Pinochet crony who headed the Chilean secret service, which was abolished a year ago; DINA Operations Director Pedro Espinoza Bravo; DINA Agent Armando Fernández Larios and four Cuban exiles who



Slain Exile Orlando Letelier

An indictment that may stir up Chileans.



DINA Chief Contreras

belong to a fanatically anti-Castro group in the U.S. All seven were charged with murder.

The key evidence for the 15-page indictment came from Townley, who was named as an unindicted co-conspirator. He had been reluctantly turned over to the U.S. in April by Chilean officials—only after the U.S. had threatened to break diplomatic relations. Townley was offered leniency by investigators in return for his testimony. The indictment states that he, Espinoza and Fernández set up the assassination on orders from Contreras and that the Cubans helped carry out the actual bombing.

In Santiago, Pinochet ordered that the three Chileans be kept under house arrest. Espinoza and Fernández are officers in Chile's army; Contreras, once Chile's second most powerful official, was forced by Pinochet to resign in October to improve the junta's image. The Chilean Supreme Court now must determine whether the U.S. has enough evidence to warrant extraditing them to the U.S.

Pinochet insisted that the charges were only "presumptions and not proof," leading State Department officials to believe that he has no intention of turning over the trio. Nonetheless, some State Department specialists still hoped that Chileans' outrage over the indictment might compel Pinochet to cooperate. Said one U.S. official: "The possibility that a death squad was sent to the United States with the knowing consent of Pinochet is something that is bound to stir up most Chileans." But they lack most political and press freedoms, and Pinochet has weathered serious political storms in the past. When reporters in Santiago asked him last week if the government would fall, he responded defiantly: "Absolutely not." ■