

Letelier Verdict, Amply Covered in Chile, Has Little Impact



JUAN MANUEL CONTRERAS
SEPULVEDA
... trial in Chile looks more likely

By Charles A. Krause
Washington Post Foreign Service

SANTIAGO, Chile Feb. 15—Despite generous coverage in Chile's once tightly restricted press the Letelier trial verdict in Washington on Wednesday did not excite much interest here today.

The reason, according to most observers, was that the political significance of the trial had been substantially downgraded because neither opponents nor supporters of Chile's military government any longer think that the United States has evidence linking the assassination of Orlando Letelier to the president, Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

In addition, evidence presented during the trial was so confusing, as it was related in Chile's popular press, that average Chileans apparently saw the proceedings more as a trial of the main witness and admitted assassin, Michael Townley, than of Chile's old secret police, DINA, and the three Cubans who the evidence showed were accomplices of DINA agent Townley.

Nonetheless, most observers agreed that the conviction of the three Cu-

bans—based largely on Townley's testimony—will make it far more difficult for Chile's Supreme Court to avoid ordering a trial of Gen. Juan Manuel Contreras Sepulveda, the former head of the secret police here, and two other DINA operatives accused by Townley of having either ordered or participated in Letelier's murder.

The U.S. government has asked that the three Chileans be extradited to stand trial in Washington, a decision now pending before Israel Borquez, president of Chile's Supreme Court.

Had the three Cubans been found innocent, many observers thought Borquez might decide against ordering either extradition or a trial in Chile on the grounds that an American jury had not found the evidence persuasive.

Now it is widely believed that the Carter administration, strengthened by the guilty verdict, will retaliate diplomatically should Borquez set free Contreras and the other two DINA officers, Armando Fernandez Larios and Pedro Espinoza.

Lawyers here for the three Chileans have argued that Townley was really working for the CIA rather than the

DINA, the same argument that the jury in Washington found unpersuasive in considering the evidence against the three Cubans, Guillermo Novo Sampol, Alvin Ross Diaz and Ignacio Novo Sampol.

Despite front-page headlines in *El Mercurio*, Chile's most influential paper, which read "Letelier Case: Jury Holds the Three Cubans Guilty" and other dailies, people here did not crowd around news stands as they did in September when the United States asked for the extradition of the Chilean DINA officers.

La Segunda, an afternoon tabloid that covered the trial from beginning to end with its own special correspondent, had full color drawings of the three guilty Cubans and Townley on its front page.

Radio Cooperativa, a station widely known to be opposed to the military government here, devoted 6 of its 20 minutes of national news this morning to the Letelier verdict.

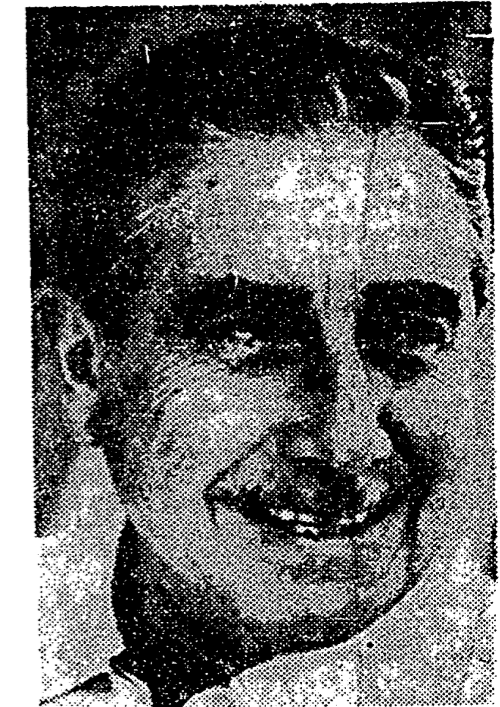
Ultimas Noticias, another tabloid, quoted Letelier's widow Isabel as saying that "the person who ordered the assassination, Augusto Pinochet, has not yet been charged."

Chile's press, under tight restrictions since the military coup of 1973, would not have dared print that statement a year ago. Then, as the Letelier case moved toward trial in Washington, Santiago's newspapers began intensive coverage of that issue and other embarrassing to the Pinochet government.

Still, a guilty verdict was generally expected and "had already been discounted," according to a businessman with close ties to the military government. The only surprises left will be if Borquez orders the three Chileans extradited, or if Contreras has hard evidence that Pinochet ordered the assassination, which is considered unlikely.

It is generally expected that the Supreme Court president will take a middle road—ordering a trial in Chile based on the evidence provided by U.S. authorities.

It is also considered possible that if Contreras is ordered to trial, he will attempt to implicate Pinochet. But even diplomatic observers agree that Contreras would have to have more than his word to seriously damage the president.



GEN. AUGUSTO PINOCHET
... seen as little affected