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Key Panther Witnesses Under Guard

By MIKE PEARL

Three undercover policemen who will be key witnesses in next week's Black Panther conspiracy trial here have been placed in protective custody, The Post learned today.

A police source said "we are taking precautionary measures. Their lives are still in danger. They took enough chances during their undercover operation. There is no sense in them risking further exposure."

The three officers were members of the Panthers from August, 1968 until April, 1969, when indictments were handed down against 22 persons accused of conspiring to bomb public places.

For a month before they went underground, the officers worked at establishing cover identities for themselves which would not be questioned by the Panther organization.

Once they began their undercover operations, the police source said, they could no longer see their families. "They lived under a threat of instant death."

Their testimony is expected to be the key evidence in the prosecution's contention that the group conspired to cause havoc by setting off bombs in major public buildings in the city.

The trial is expected to last three months. Of the 22, one is hospitalized; two are in New Jersey awaiting extradition; one jumped $25,000 bail; three are still at large, and the remainder are held in bail totaling more than $1 million.

Recently, a group of clergymen and laymen began appeals in their congregation for funds to help post bail. In addition, symphony conductor Leonard Bernstein held a fund-raising gathering last week for the Panther Legal Defense Fund.

Although the number "21" is used to describe the defendants, a subsequent indictment named a 22d person in the crimes.

Among the crimes they alleged planned were the bombing of department stores, railroad facilities, the New York Botanical Gardens and police precinct houses.