

Letelier Slaying Break Indicated By U.S. Action

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For the first time in the 17 months since former Chilean Ambassador Orlando Letelier was assassinated by a bomb planted in his car, federal investigators have given some public indication they have developed firm information on who might have been responsible for his death.

In addition to Letelier, Ronni Moffitt, his associate at the Institute for Policy Studies, was killed when a bomb exploded under the driver's seat of Letelier's car as they rounded Sheridan Circle on their way to work Sept. 21, 1976.

There has been a great deal of public speculation that Letelier, ambassador to the United States under the administration of the late Chilean Marxist president Salvador Allende and a leader of Chilean political exiles after Allende died during a military coup, was a target of either anti-Communist Cubans or Chilean secret police or both.

BUT FEDERAL OFFICIALS investigating the case have refused, until now, to give any indication whether they had indentified any suspects, who they might be, or for whom they might have worked.

The break came yesterday when U.S. Attorney Earl J. Silbert filed papers asking the U.S. District Court's permission to send "letters interrogatories" to the Chilean Supreme Court. While the interrogatories themselves are under court seal, the accompanying cover letter to the Chilean court from Chief Judge William B. Bryant was filed publicly.

While the papers filed do not state specifically who is under investigation, it is clear the government has firm information who the assassins might be and believes there is some sort of Chile connection.

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Silbert said in the papers that investigators have learned the names of two Chilean military men who entered the country on official passports a month before the killings, one of whom is believed to have talked to at least one of the assassins. Because of the syntax of the papers, it is unclear whether the alleged conversation occurred before or after the slayings.

According to court papers, federal investigators believe the two men have some knowledge concerning the slayings and would like to talk to them. Since there is no convenient way to get them here before the grand jury investigating the case, Bryant — as the official representative of the court and the grand jury — has asked the Chilean court to question the men under oath for him.

IN ADDITION, Bryant asked that Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene M. Propper, who is heading the Letelier investigation, be allowed to attend the hearing and ask supplemental questions if needed.

The procedure, known as letters interrogatory, is provided for under international law and is not uncommon, but because of the international ramifications of this case, Bryant's request may have put the Chilean government — which reportedly has offered assistance in the investigation — on the spot.

Between the lines of the carefully worded and gracious cover letter, the U.S. government is essentially telling the Chileans it has a pretty good idea who plotted to kill Orlando Letelier and further it is possible some Chilean nationals had a hand in it, or at least possessed information they have failed to volunteer thus far.

Assuming the interrogatories are answered truthfully, it could prove embarrassing to the military government, but to refuse the U.S. request could also prove embarrassing.

Officially the State Department, which delivered the interrogatories through routine diplomatic channels to the Chilean foreign minister yesterday, said it expects the Chilean court to comply as a routine collegial gesture to Bryant.

BUT PRIVATELY, State Department officials conceded that they have handled the case quite delicately, clearing it at least through State's No. 2 man, Deputy Secretary Warren Christopher.

On Friday, officials said, the Chilean ambassador was asked to the State Department and was personally handed an advance copy of Bryant's letter by Christopher. At the same time, the U.S. ambassador to Chile, George Landau, gave an advance copy to Chilean Foreign Minister Patricio Carvajal Prado, in Santiago.

While Silbert refused any further comment on the letter, its description of the two military men, identified as Juan Williams Rose and Alejandro Romeral Jara, suggests they were not ordinary government representatives, and may in fact, be representatives of DINA, Chile's secret police.

According to the letter, the two first entered the United States under false papers from a country other than Chile. These papers were revoked by the United States in August 1976, but shortly thereafter they re-entered with official Chilean passports indicating they were on government business.

In addition to the interrogatories, the package sent under seal to Chile yesterday is reputed to include photographs of two possible suspects in the case as well as photographs of Williams and Romeral suggesting a U.S. government doubt that even those are their real names.