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Nerve Gas Brought Into U.S. In Letelier Plot, Townley Says

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Michael Vernon Townley, the American-born Chilean agent who directed the 1976 assassination of former Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier, has told the FBI that at one point he had a quantity of deadly nerve gas concealed in a Chanel No. 5 perfume atomizer brought into the United States for possible use in the plot.

Townley also said that anti-Castro Cuban activists, who allegedly aided him, knew he had the gas and asked him for some to use in their activities. But Townley said that, because he considered the Cubans "unstable," he returned the gas to the Chilean secret police, who had developed it

for possible use against neighboring Peru and Argentina.

His declarations about the gas are in a confidential memo sent last Wednesday to various government agencies by FBI Director William H. Webster. The Washington Post has obtained a copy of the memo.

The FBI says in the memo that it has reached no conclusions about the truth of Townley's statements. Federal law enforcement sources familiar with the case said privately yesterday they have no reason to believe that any nerve gas was used in this country or that any is still here.

Carlos de Costa Nora, minister counselor of the Chilean Embassy here, said yesterday he had not heard about the matter before and therefore found it "very difficult to comment." He added, however, "The truth of Mr. Townley's accusations has been the subject of dispute in the past."

The nerve gas story is a bizarre and grisly new footnote to the killing of Letelier and a young American associate, Ronni Karpen Moffitt, whose car was destroyed by a remote control bomb on Sheridan Circle along Emb

It could also become a political issue, kindling for the continuing controversy over President Reagan's decision to improve U.S. ties and renew military ties with the regime of Chilean President Augusto Pinochet, despite its history of repression and its refusal to cooperate with U.S. investigations of the murder plot.

On Monday, House-Senate conferees are scheduled to try to reconcile the different approaches to Chilean military assistance taken by the two branches of Congress in their recently passed foreign aid authorization bills. The House version would continue an existing prohibition on military help to the Pinochet government, but the Senate bill would permit resumed aid if the president certifies, among other things, that Chile is not abetting international terrorism.

According to Webster's memo, information about the gas first was uncovered by Eugene M. Propper, the former chief federal prosecutor in the Letelier matter, and Taylor Branch, a writer collaborating with Propper on a book about the case.

In the course of their research, the memo says, they discovered several letters sent from the United States by Townley to his superior in the Chilean secret service, then known as DINA. In these Townley refers to what the memo calls "a highly secret DINA undertaking known as 'Project Andrea'" and expresses concern that the United States might learn details of the project "which would be highly embarrassing to the Chilean government."

Townley, who ultimately pleaded guilty in 1978 to a charge of conspiracy to murder Letelier, was described as especially worried that these details might be uncovered by tracing his dealings with various Miami and London firms from which he purchased chemicals, electronic equipment and gas storage cylinders.

Eventually, the memo continues, Propper and Branch discovered that "Project Andrea" involved the manufacture of nerve gas by DINA, which was to be utilized against Argentina and Peru in the event of hostilities between these countries and Chile.

According to Propper and Branch, Townley, acting for DINA, manufactured and stored a quantity of the gas at a laboratory in his Santiago, Chile, home during 1975 and 1976, working with a Chilean chemical engineer, Eugenio Berrics, who had the DINA code name of "Hermes."

They said "Townley created a substance known as isopropylmethylphosphonofluoridate, a clear liquid organophosphate commonly known as sarin, which vaporizes on being exposed to the atmosphere, producing droplets that enter the body through the skin or lungs to interdict the neurochemistry that permits the respiratory muscles to function."

In the version of the story told to the FBI by Propper and Branch, Townley carried the perfume bottle filled with the nerve gas in his shirt pocket when he flew to the United States in September, 1976, on the Chilean national airline, LAN-Chile. Propper and Branch gave the FBI the names of eight LAN-Chile employees who allegedly helped Townley and DINA transport materials between Chile and the United States.

The two writers said Townley ultimately decided not to try to use the gas against Letelier. But, they added, Guillermo Novo Sampol and Virgilio Pablo Paz Romero, two Cuban terrorists who were accused of helping Townley plan and carry out the Letelier murder, were aware that Townley had the gas and had watched him manufacturing it while visiting him in Santiago.

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