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# Letelier witness says made him ease testimony

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WASHINGTON — Fearing death from anti-Castro Cubans, a key government witness says he deliberately tried to sound less believable in the retrial of two Cuban nationalists for the murder of Chilean leftist Orlando Letelier.

The retrial ended May 30 with the acquittal of Guillermo Novo Sampol, 41, and Alvin Ross Diaz, 48. They had been serving life sentences.

Ricardo Canete, now in hiding under the Federal Witness Protection Program, told the Sunday News Journal that "I decided in order to save my wife and family I had to sound less convincing. I cannot rely on the government to protect me or them. I was convinced the government would not make their case and they didn't."

In an interview, Canete also said the star government witness, Michael Vernon Townley, toned down his testimony.

Letelier, the 44-year-old spokesman for the overthrown Allende regime in Chile, was killed along with an American co-worker in a Washington, D.C., car bombing on Sept. 21, 1976. E. Lawrence Barcella Jr., an assistant U.S. attorney who prosecuted the case, called it the most blatant act of terrorism in United States history.

Barcella confirmed last week that "Rick [Canete] made a terrible witness. He usually is a consummate actor and he just wasn't this time."

Barcella also said that Townley, serving a plea-bargained 3-to-10-year sentence as the trigger man and organizer of the Letelier killing, "was just not as convincing as he was in the first trial. They just didn't believe Mike." In that original trial in January 1979 the defendants were convicted.

Canete said it was clear in Townley's testimony at the second trial that "Mike isn't happy about having to spend time in jail when the guys he testified against are loose."

Townley was not available for an interview. Barcella says that rules about government-protected witnesses in prison are so strict that no interview was allowed.

"He just wasn't as sharp and I know he is a sharp guy," Barcella said about Townley. "I think he understood that the politics of the situation had changed. The Reagan people had a lot of support in the Cuban community."

One high official at the Justice Department believes that it is only a matter of time before the order comes down for Barcella and the FBI to put the Letelier case "on the shelf." That official asked that his name not be used.

"It is an embarrassment to prosecute and try to extradite officials of a government you are trying to improve relations with," the Justice Department attorney said.

Barcella says "the fact that we have indicted three Chilean officials, and the Reagan Administration has lifted sanctions that Carter had put on that government for not extradicting them, gives the impression the government isn't behind this prosecution . . . The Letelier case is a Jimmy Carter human rights leftover."

Barcella said that while he was not happy about the acquittal of Novo and Ross, "they were aides to Townley in the plot. Those behind the murder are still protected in Chile by the government and still at large."

He was referring to two indicted Cuban Nationalists, whom he called "more direct participants" in the fatal bombing, and to three indicted Chilean secret police officials who are protected from extradition for trial here by the Chilean government.

The Cuban Nationalists, Virgilio Paz Romero, 29, and Jose Dionisio Suarez Esquivel, 42, received their training in explosives and assassination from the CIA during the days

when anti-Castro activity was sanctioned by the government.

The Sunday News Journal reported in February 1980 that intelligence and law enforcement officials in the United States, Chile and South Africa believe the men have also been used in a dozen such political assassinations in their countries.

A CIA official, who helped train the Cubans, said last week, "Look, when you implicate the Chilean secret police, you implicate our own CIA. The Chileans indicted [Juan Manuel] Contreras Sepulveda, who headed their secret police, and ordered the killing, recently participated in security exercises with U.S. intelligence."

Barcella and L. Carter Cornick, the FBI agent in charge of the Letelier investigation, say the most humiliating aspect is the fact that they had to go to the CIA "hat in hand," as Barcella put it, and request the CIA to volunteer information about how much of a role U.S. intelligence had in training the Cubans and the Chileans.

"It is very possible the CIA lied to me and withheld information from me on these cases," Barcella said after the retrial. "Some reporters might suggest I took a dive on these. But dammit, I have to have facts to go into court and the CIA can just about do anything they want."

Still wanted are Contreras Sepulveda, and two agents of DINA, the Chilean secret police, Capt. Armando Fernandez Larios and Col. Pedro Espinoza.

Barcella has little hope of seeing them tried. "My stock isn't too high over at the State Department these days," he says with a laugh, referring to the possibility the men will be expatriated.

Canete was a valuable witness because as a founding member of the Cuban Nationalist Movement in the United States, he infiltrated the leadership of Omega 7.

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