

Sniper, Rault Fire Link Raised by Center Owner

By ANGUS LIND

Persons responsible for the tragic Nov. 29 Rault Center fire may have been involved in the Jan. 7 Howard Johnson sniping incident, the owner of the Rault Center said today.

Joseph M. Rault Jr. said there is "a distinct possibility" that the two could be linked.

"The description of Mark Essex (the sniper slain on the hotel's rooftop in a hail of police bullets) might have fit one of two men seen in the building (the Rault Center) the morning of the fire," he said.

Rault, commenting for the first time on the tragedy which killed six persons, said the men seen in the building that morning were spotted by a security guard because they acted peculiarly. "Peculiarly enough," Rault added, "that the guard noticed they were there, but not peculiar enough that he would challenge them."

HE SAID the guard remembered the men when he saw a picture of Mark Essex after the sniping incident. The men in the Rault Center that morning, Rault said, "were reading the directory and were seen going up in the ele-

vator." He said they were later seen back in the lobby and described them as well-dressed.

Rault said he is convinced arsonists started the fire in his building as the state fire marshal has said and today offered a \$25,000 reward for their arrest and conviction.

Asked why he waited so long to make a statement, Rault said he "thought it inappropriate to comment before because it might have interfered with the investigation of law enforcement officials."

However, he said, "We have run all rumors down and nothing has materialized." He said he felt if the public were made aware of all the possibilities, someone might offer new information concerning the fire.

Rault said since work began on the building, "more than one quarter of a million dollars has already been spent." He said this work is not visible to the public because most of it is tearing-out work.

Rault said the building's tenants have all been relocated and he was adequately covered financially by insurance to sustain his losses.

However, he said, there is no way to

cover the loss of lives and the emotions that go with it.

THE BUILDING will not be completely restored until a year from now, he said, and estimated the job would cost from \$2 million to \$3 million, nearly as much as the building cost originally.

Asked if he would now install sprinkler systems in his building, Rault said his architects and engineers have been instructed to give him a report on it to see if it is feasible.

Explaining the reward offer, Rault said he is offering \$5,000 for information leading to the arrest of the person or persons responsible, with \$20,000 more to be paid upon conviction.

Of the \$25,000 offered, \$20,000 was put up by Rault himself and \$5,000 by

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Of the \$25,000 reward. The Times-Picayune has posted \$5,000, the maximum its Secret Witness program permits, Rault said. Disbursement of all money will be governed by the Secret Witness Program, under which the identity of any informant will be kept secret.

Persons wishing to give information should write P.O. Box 13534, New Orleans, La. 70125 or call 504-321-2291. The reward will be available for 60 days, and police and employees of The Times-Picayune Publishing Co. are not eligible.

In announcing the offer, Rault said, "I wish to state my personal sympathy to the families, relatives and friends of those who perished or were injured in the fire.

"Nothing I can say will solve or restore your deep losses. However, within the framework of our system of laws, I can and will do everything possible to assist our authorities in seeking justice and bringing about a solution to this crime.

"I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to the employees, guests and friends of the Rault Center who assisted in successfully evacuating some 400 persons from the building at the time of the fire. We cannot adequately express our gratitude for this."

All 17 floors of the building were damaged by the blaze, Rault said, but he believes the lower floors can be reopened within 60 days.

The middle section of the building will be ready for reopening within six months, he said, and the top floors within a year.

Murvan M. Maxwell, an architect with Maxwell & LeBreton, said the work is "moving steadily," but much work remains to be done.

He said the roof of the 17th floor did not collapse as was reported, but only a "weakly constructed" sundeck shelter over the swimming pool.

Rault said he concurs with the State Fire Marshal's report issued last Friday giving arson as the cause of the fire. But he had added that he has no idea who might have wanted to start the fire.