

FBI Role In Slaying Will Be Ford Target

By JOHN BENNETT

From The Commercial Appeal
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Rep. Harold Ford (D-Tenn.), scheduled to ask the first questions of Dr. Ralph Abernathy at Monday's public hearing into the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., said Friday the FBI will eventually have "a lot of explaining to do" about King's death.

"I think as the public hearing gets underway, the American public will be feeling the same way," Ford said on the eve of televised House select subcommittee hearings.

The Memphis lawmaker was briefed Friday by House investigators about the format and specifics of his questions of Abernathy, the subcommittee's first witness.

Ford is to spend from 10 to 15 minutes questioning Abernathy about events surrounding and leading up to King's death on the night of April 4, 1968, at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

King died in Abernathy's arms.

Like Abernathy, Ford also holds to the conspiracy theory and believes the FBI helped create a climate leading to the murder of the civil rights leader.

In an interview this week, Abernathy told The Commercial Appeal he believes the FBI and Memphis police helped "conspirators" get James Earl Ray out of Memphis following King's murder.

"I think it will be shown, if there was a conspiracy, that he (Ray) was a part of the conspiracy," Ford said in an interview at his Capitol office Friday. "All evidence to this point leads me to believe Ray pulled the trigger to kill Dr. King.

"There's also evidence that leads me to believe others played a part," he said. "I think the FBI has a lot of explaining to do."

Abernathy said Ray wrote him a letter from Brushy Mountain Prison in Tennessee last week saying he will identify the source of money he used to flee the United States following King's murder — if he can get a new trial.

Neither Ford nor other subcommittee members have indicated Ray might be prepared to identify names of conspirators when he testifies next week. A third witness, not identified, will also testify next week. Additional King hearings are scheduled for November.

Investigators took painstaking care Friday to prepare Ford for his line of questioning when hearings open Monday morning.

The hearings will actually begin with opening statements by Rep. Louis Stokes

(D-Ohio), chairman of the full House assassinations committee, and by Rep. Walter Fauntroy, the delegate to the House from the District of Columbia, chairman of the subcommittee probing King's death. Another subcommittee investigating the assassination of President John F. Kennedy will hold hearings next month.

Ford will begin his questions following the introduction of Abernathy of Atlanta as the first witness.

Ford said his questioning will not only probe Abernathy's recall of events leading to King's death, but also what he remembers about the FBI's interest in King's presence in Memphis before his murder.

FBI "attitudes" about the slain civil rights leader will also be probed at the hearing.

"I want to know, did King fear the FBI at all times," Ford said in the private interview. "Did he receive threatening phone calls?"

For example, he explained, King would never have stayed at the Black-owned Lorraine Motel where he was killed had it not been for the FBI.

Ford said it was the FBI that circulated statements that King would be a "hypocrite" to stay in the Rivermont in Memphis, thereby causing King to check in at the Lorraine.

In a Scripps-Howard News Service story Friday, two unnamed committee members said evidence collected by investigators during the 15-month probe, including 28 hours of intensive, taped interviews with Ray, "leave no doubt" as to Ray's guilt.

Ray, scheduled to appear before the committee Wednesday, now claims he was an innocent "fall guy" of a conspiracy to carry out the assassination, despite originally pleading guilty to the crime and avoiding a possible death sentence.

Ray's role in the killing is to be explored next week and the allegations about the FBI are to be the subject of public hearings in November.

Meanwhile, in Knoxville, Ray's brother Jerry said reports that James Earl Ray was actively planning another attempt to escape from Brushy Mountain Penitentiary are false.

Jerry Ray told a Knoxville television station that investigators for the House Assassinations Committee leaked the report in an effort to get his brother transferred to a federal prison.

NBC News reported Thursday that a committee informant had stolen and sent photocopies of letters written by James Earl Ray outlining the plot to the House panel's staff.