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King Assassination

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) -- The man who confessed to killing the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. asked for freedom Monday on what he contends is new evidence of a conspiracy in the slaying of the civil rights leader.

Short of release, James Earl Ray told the state Criminal Court in a petition that he believes he is entitled to a hearing on his claim.

Ray's attorney, William Pepper, said such a hearing could allow the defense to question witnesses under oath, review sealed government files and test the rifle authorities say was used to shoot King in 1968.

It could also lead to a state grand jury investigation into the slaying, said Pepper, who is from London.

Ray, a drifter and small-time criminal, was arrested in London two months after King's murder and brought to Memphis. Since his guilty plea in 1969, he has tried to recant and go to trial.

He is serving a 99-year sentence at a state prison in Nashville.

Pepper contends a "broad conspiracy" led to King's murder and Ray was set up as a fall guy. He accused state and federal authorities of a coverup.

Ray's petition also argues that Tennessee law in 1969 did not authorize plea negotiations in first-degree murder cases.

Pepper told a news conference that Ray continues to argue, as he has for more than 24 years, that he was set up by a shadowy underworld figure he knew only as "Raoul." He declined to name the people he believes were behind the alleged plot.

Also at the news conference was a group of pastors who want a grand jury investigation or trial for Ray.

Many Americans, particularly blacks, are dissatisfied with the official conclusion on how King died, said James Lawson, a Los Angeles pastor who had a church in Memphis in 1968.

"In the guilty plea of James Earl Ray, we did not get any semblance of the reality of how, why or who assassinated Dr. King," Lawson said.

John Pierotti, the state prosecutor, declined comment on Ray's petition. Pierotti recently refused a request by Ray's lawyers to

reopen the King investigation.

King was shot as he stood on a balcony of The Lorraine Motel while in Memphis to help organize a strike by sanitation workers.