

Life support eyed for ailing King killer

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NASHVILLE — Family members hope James Earl Ray can survive long enough for a hearing they hope will finally start the process of clearing him in the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Ray, who confessed to the 1968 shooting death of the civil rights leader and has been trying to recant ever since, remained in a coma in critical condition yesterday, said Freida Herndon, a spokeswoman for Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital.

Ray, 68, is suffering from liver and kidney damage.

Jerry Ray said yesterday he would

authorize putting his brother on life-support equipment if necessary. On Tuesday, he said he would refuse such a measure.

"The Rev. James Lawson called me from California yesterday," Jerry Ray said. "James' attorney William Pepper called, too, and they convinced me that we had a good chance at a hearing in Memphis on Feb. 20 to clear his name after all these years."

Pepper is trying to get permission from Criminal Court Judge Joseph Brown Jr. to test a rifle that was found with James Earl Ray's fingerprints.

Pepper and Ray, who has contended he was a fall guy for the real killers, think that tests on the rifle would

prove it was not the murder weapon. Prosecutors say the tests are a waste of time and could damage the evidence.

"Judge Brown is an honest judge in Memphis," Jerry Ray said. "If James dies, that hearing won't happen. If James dies, he goes down in history as Martin Luther King's killer, and that makes the whole Ray family look bad."

Lawson, a Los Angeles pastor who had a church in Memphis in 1968, is one of several black leaders who have said they don't believe Ray was the assassin. King was assassinated by sniper fire April 4, 1968, while on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where he had gone to support a strike

by sanitation workers.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with King, said Monday they held out hope for a deathbed confession from Ray, detailing all he knew about the assassination.

Ray was sentenced to 99 years in prison after his confession. He was serving time at Riverbend Maximum-Security Prison until last weekend, when he was transferred from a prison medical hospital to Columbia.

"Right now, he's breathing a lot better," Jerry Ray said. "But his liver is messed up; they're pumping blood out of there."