

King Assassin Ray Out of Coma; Rights

Reuter

NASHVILLE, Dec. 26—James Earl Ray, the assassin of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., emerged from a coma and was talking today but remained in serious condition with organ failure, officials said.

Ray, 68, spoke with his brother, Jerry Ray, a frequent visitor to his bedside at Columbia Memorial Hospital in Nashville where he was brought last weekend in a coma, prison spokesman Jim Rose said. A hospital

spokeswoman said Ray's condition was upgraded to serious from critical.

Jerry Ray has said his eldest brother, who was not a drinker, suffered from cirrhosis of the liver, causing his liver and kidneys to fail.

Ray initially confessed to shooting King in 1968 and is serving a 99-year sentence for the crime, but he later recanted and has since repeatedly denied he was the gunman. The latest in court hearings on his case was scheduled for Feb. 20 in Memphis.

"If he dies before February 20th, then the hearing is off, and he'll go

down in history as the murderer of King," Jerry Ray told reporters Wednesday. After initially declaring he would not permit doctors to use machines to keep his brother alive, he said he had approved use of life-support systems if necessary.

Legal observers gave Ray little chance of a reversal in court, but several civil rights leaders expressed hope he will make a deathbed confession incriminating others in King's assassination. The killing set off weeks of urban race riots across the

Leaders Hope for Statement

country and raised questions about a possible conspiracy.

"The assassination of Dr. King is an unsolved mystery in our country. It was an act of political terrorism," said Jesse L. Jackson, the civil rights leader who knelt by the stricken King on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

"James Earl Ray did not have sufficient political motivation to assassinate Dr. King as a lone actor, nor did he have the money to organize the scheme," Jackson said. "I'm hoping that at this hour James Earl Ray will

tell us who was involved, other than this mysterious Raoul." Ray has said he was set up and bought the rifle used in King's slaying for a mystery accomplice named Raoul.

Before he shot King, Ray had a long history of bungling petty crimes and failing in prison escapes. But he managed to elude authorities for two months after the shooting and was finally apprehended in London, leading to questions about where he got the money for his escape and how and why a small-time robber would shoot the Nobel Peace Prize winner.