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LONDON AP - Asst. U.S. Atty. Gen. Fred M. Vinson Jr. visited James Earl Ray in a heavily guarded police station Sunday, then began moving to get the accused killer of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. back to the United States as quickly

as possible. As he did, a new element of mystery in the case arose. Airport sources said that Ray, seized Saturday while trying to board a flight for Brussels, could have gone from the Lisbon plane that brought him to London directly to the transit lounge, and thus avoided immigration officers.

His capture indicated he left the transit lounge - either to meet someone or possibly to kill time - and consequently got caught.

Vinson talked with British authorities about Ray's extradition, a procedure which would take two to three weeks under normal conditions. But if Ray hired lawyers to challenge the action, the process could run considerably longer with an initial hearing and possible appeals.

In Washington, U.S. Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark said Ray has made no statement and would not be questioned except in a manner "in strict conformity to applicable legal standards."

Clark said Vinson's top priorities in his mission are to see that Ray is as secure as he can be - that nothing happens to him - and that he is returned to the United States for trial as soon as possible.

Clark said he could make no estimate of how soon Ray might be returned. He said it is possible Ray might waive extradition or that he might be deported under an "exclusion principle" of British law. Clark did not elaborate.

He said he is working with Tennessee Gov. Buford Ellington, Vinson and British officials on the question of extradition if that proves necessary.

Asked about a possible conspiracy in the murder of King, particularly in view of the suspect's expensive travel without known financial means, Clark said:

"We have to go on the evidence and facts. At this time we have no evidence of a conspiracy. If there was one, it will be discovered."

Clark said Ray "is a person who lived a life of crime" and it was plausible that he might have financed his travels that way.

Clark was interviewed on the ABC radio-television program "Issues and Answers."

Ray, 40, was being kept under tight security at Cannon Row police station in preparation for his appearance Monday morning at Bow Street Magistrate's Court. He will answer there to two charges growing out of his arrest at Heathrow Airport - traveling under a false passport and illegal possession of a fire arm.

A yard spokesman said Ray was under constant surveillance.

"This is a big fish," he told a caller.

Ray, who disappeared for two months after King's assassination April 4, had a loaded pistol in his hip pocket when immigration officers seized.

After arriving in London Sunday to "expedite the extradition," Vinson met at Scotland Yard headquarters with Chief Superintendent Thomas Butler, head of the flying squad that handled Britain's Great Train Robbery case, and Chief Inspector Kenneth Thomson. They were reported offering Vinson full cooperation in speeding the extradition process.

Talking with newsmen, Vinson declined to say if he would seek to return Ray on the federal charge of conspiring to deny King his civil rights or on a Tennessee charge that he murdered King.

Legal sources said that to extradite Ray, American authorities would have to submit an application at Bow Street Court for the prisoner's provisional arrest - to keep him in jail - under the British-American extradition treaty.

To support this, the court would require material evidence showing there was a case against Ray. The British court would weigh the evidence and grant leave for extradition if a magistrate agreed the evidence was material and justifiable. This, normally, would take two or three weeks.

Ray could contest the extradition application and possibly the evidence as well, provided he hired or obtained a lawyer. If a magistrate overruled that defense, Ray could appeal and the case would go to a higher court.

Under provisional arrest, Ray would have to appear before a magistrate once every seven days for police, under the habeas corpus principle, to show reason why he was still being held.

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