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Abernathy-Bevel
By JACK STILLMAN
Associated Press Writer

ATLANTA, Ga. AP - The Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, called Thursday on "America's oppressed and victimized to come to the aid and defense" of James Earl Ray, charged in the slaying of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Abernathy, who succeeded King as president of SCLC, said he stands behind the Rev. James Bevel, the official of SCLC who has offered to defend Ray.

The civil rights leader said that in offering to defend Ray, Bevel "is trying to move nonviolence into a new dimension of American life."

Abernathy previously has pleaded that the life of Ray "or whoever is proven to have pulled the trigger" in King's assassination be spared.

In his statement, Abernathy declared that "One man should not be made the scapegoat for this monstrous crime. The American public must have all the information about the guilt for this murder."

Bevel said at a news conference in Philadelphia, Pa., last Sunday that he has evidence that could free Ray.

King was cut down by a sniper's bullet while aiding a strike of garbage collectors at Memphis, Tenn., last spring.

"I have evidence that would free him," said Bevel, director of nonviolent education and action for SCLC.

Abernathy said that he has conferred with other members of SCLC, including Bevel, and that they have agreed with his comments.

"Rev. Bevel is speaking to the real issue—namely that it is not who killed Dr. King, but what killed him," he said.

"If a conspiracy exists, and I believe it does, it must be fully exposed. Going beyond a conspiracy, Americans must understand the broader guilt of a society which has been killing off its best young leaders."

He said Americans should "seek the justice Dr. King worked for, rather than seek the murder of Mr. Ray."

He declared that Bevel "is looking past the question of killing to the question of life in his offer to defend Mr. Ray's life."

"I call upon America's oppressed and victimized to come to the aid and defense of the accused man. If all who share the guilt for Dr. King's assassination were put to death, it would be an atrocity greater than that committed by Adolph Hitler."

"We, the oppressed, believe in healing this sick society, not in putting it to death."

In his telegram to Ray last weekend, Bevel said:

"I would like to inform you that I would be very happy to take your case without fee. I was present on April 4 at the Lorraine Motel when Dr. King died. You have been accused of murdering him. Of course, I know you are not guilty."

Bevel, 32, is not a member of the bar, but says he is a lawyer "by circumstances."

He said he is qualified to defend Ray because of legal experience gained while representing himself during civil rights cases in Mississippi.

Ray is scheduled to go on trial March 3 at Memphis on a charge of murder.

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