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MEMPHIS, Tenn. AP - James Earl Ray has a date in court today amid speculation-unconfirmed by any official source-that he would plead guilty to murdering Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and take a 99-year prison sentence.

There was no guarantee that the hearing called by Judge W. Preston Battle would involve a plea of guilt or innocence by the 40-year-old defendant.

Some observers thought it might bring nothing more dramatic than a motion for a change of venue or some other legal maneuver by Ray's lawyer, Percy Foreman of Houston, Tex.

The Memphis Commercial Appeal reported that Foreman had conferred with two of Ray's brothers and a sister last week, apparently to clear the way for a guilty plea.

Doubters pointed out that with a 99-year sentence, Ray would not be eligible for parole for at least 33 years.

The state had said previously it would demand death in the electric chair but no one has been executed in Tennessee since 1961.

Should a jury sentence Ray to life imprisonment, parole could be possible in 13½ years.

Neither Foreman nor the prosecuting staff would comment on the reports that the deal for a 99-year term had been made.

Ray, an escapee from the Missouri State Penitentiary, was arrested in London last June 8, two months and four days after King was killed by a single shot as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

Ray was returned to Memphis in July after lengthy extradition proceedings and since then has been held under extraordinary security precautions in an air-conditioned and TV-monitored cell block of the Shelby County jail.

He has made fewer than a half-dozen court appearances since his return, the first for his arraignment and the remainder as a series of procedural defense motions were argued.

Tennessee law in first-degree-murder cases requires a jury to set a sentence regardless of the plea entered, but a provision of the statute allows jurors who say they can not agree with a recommended sentence to be disqualified.

The law further requires that the prosecution must then prove that King was killed.

Under the rules governing a guilty plea, the attorneys then stipulate that if the case had gone to trial evidence would have been presented to show that Ray was the man who shot King.

King was slain on the night of April 4 while in Memphis to help about 1,300 sanitation workers, most of them Negroes, in a strike against the city government.

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