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By BERNARD GAVZER

Associated Press Writer

MEMPHIS, Tenn. AP - The decision of James Earl Ray to plead guilty to killing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in return for a 99-year prison term was the result of lengthy and closely guarded negotiations.

Not only did the prosecution and defense approve of the plan, a reconstruction of the events shows, but King's widow, Coretta, U.S. Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark and Tennessee Gov. Buford Ellington concurred.

Notes on telephone calls made by the prosecution and information from a New York attorney's office confirm that Mrs. King was informed of the potential agreement and apparently approved it.

But Mrs. King also made it clear that she did not want it thought that she believed Ray acted alone. After Ray entered his plea, she said: "This plea of guilty cannot be allowed to close the case or to end the search for the many fingers which helped pull the trigger."

Information now becoming available also showed that Ray at first wanted to take his chances in court, but agreed to the 99 years when presented with the evidence against him.

Ellington was not available for comment.

Ray's guilty plea before a special session of Shelby County Criminal court last Monday precluded a full-fledged trial which could have resulted in Ray's being sentenced to the electric chair.

The absence of such a trial with its full presentation of evidence has added fuel to the controversy of whether Ray was merely part of a conspiracy to kill King.

Phil Canale, Shelby County district attorney general who headed the prosecution team, and Hugh Stanton, the public defender, both confirmed that talks leading to a possible guilty plea began in December. But they differed over who instigated the negotiations.

Canale said that in a telephone conversation with the U.S. civil rights division of the Department of Justice on Dec. 19 he outlined the procedures which would be followed under Tennessee law. "The key points to the agreement were a plea of guilty and a sentence of 99 years," Canale said.

Stanton said he talked with Canale about a possible guilty plea "at least a week before Christmas, and as I remember, he said he wanted to check it out with his associates."

Stanton said the defense investigation had prompted a feeling that Ray faced a possible death sentence if the case went to trial, and that a deal could be made for the 99-year term.

Canale, on Dec. 31, called Harry Wachtel, a New York attorney for Mrs. King and Dr. King's family, to see what Mrs. King's reaction would be. Wachtel called back Jan. 3 and said Mrs. King wanted it made clear that she and others in the family thought there was no conspiracy.

But, Wachtel said, Mrs. King and other family members were "opposed in fact and in principle to capital punishment and would not wish to see Ray executed in the electric chair."

After the original call to Wachtel, Canale also discussed the matter with Ellington, who said he had no objections to the deal. On Jan. 3, Canale called the Justice Department again, and was informed that Clark had given his approval to the plan.

Judge W. Preston Battle, the trial judge, conferred with Ray's attorney, Percy Foreman of Texas, sometime in February.

"He asked me then, informally, for information regarding a guilty plea," Battle said.

The judge said Foreman also brought up the question of whether a guilty plea "could be settled with a life sentence. I said, 'Woah, that's only 13 years in this state and the very least I'd consider is 99 years.'"

"I told him that before anything could be done there would have to be a full agreement between the defense and prosecution . . . and that examination of Ray would have to take place in open court at which time Ray would have to make it clear that he understood what the plea meant."

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