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Ray-Bevel

MEMPHIS, Tenn. AP - A civil rights leader long associated with the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. says the man charged with murdering King is innocent, the Memphis Commercial Appeal reported in Sunday editions.

The newspaper said the Rev. James Bevel sent a telegram to James Earl Ray, offering to defend him.

According to the newspaper, the telegram read: "I would like to inform you that I would be very happy to take your case without fee. I was present at the Lorraine Motel when Dr. King was killed. You have been charged with murdering him. Of course, I know that you are not guilty."

Ray is scheduled to go on trial here March 3 on a charge of murder in the assassination of King last April 4.

Sheriff William Morris confirmed that Ray did receive a telegram Saturday. But he declined to disclose the contents.

And, in Philadelphia, an aide to Bevel said the civil rights leader had offered to help Ray.

Bevel is a director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which was founded by King. King relied upon Bevel to work as a liaison officer with militant Negro youths and Black Power groups.

At present, Houston attorney Percy Foreman is the lawyer for Ray. Mrs. Foreman said in Houston her husband is ill and under operation and could issue no comment on Bevel's telegram.

In Memphis, where Criminal Court Judge W. Preston Battle has issued a ban on pre-trial publicity, Public Defender Hugh Stanton refused to react to the Bevel telegram.

Stanton appeared before Battle Friday to report on how defense preparations were going and was instructed by the judge to prepare one defense in case he was to handle it by himself. Foreman was absent.

King was slain by a sniper while here to lead a strike by city garbage collectors.

Ray was arrested in London during the summer and was extradited to Memphis.

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