

Jerry Mitchell
Of The ClarionLedger
jmitchell@clarionledger.com

President Barack Obama should convene a summit on the pursuit of unpunished killings from the civil rights era, a letter urges.

"Mr. President, people are dying and memories are fading," wrote Alvin Sykes of Kansas City, architect of the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crimes Act. "Time is of the essence!"

There was no immediate response.

Congress passed the Till act but did not approve funding. Last month, the Senate defeated an amendment that would have provided \$10 million for the creation of such a cold-cases unit in the Justice Department.

In his confirmation hearing earlier this year, Attorney General Eric Holder was asked whether he still would support the cold-case initiative on unsolved crimes from the civil rights era if the initiative didn't get funding.

"They are stains on our nation's history. There are still raw feelings about what happened. And so, yes, you do have my commitment. And I'll figure out ways to try to move money around."

Last month, Holder expressed his support in a letter: "The Department of Justice wholeheartedly supports the goals of the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crimes Act. The racially motivated murders from the civil rights era

constitute some of the greatest blemishes on our history."

Sykes, president of the Emmett Till Justice Campaign, said a summit should include Holder, family members affected by these killings and supporters of the pursuit of these cases "as swiftly as possible to underscore significantly and emphatically your administration's commitment to solving these murders."

He suggested holding the summit at the White House, the National Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, the King Center in Atlanta or in Till's hometown of Chicago.

Holding a summit will help "create a justice-seeking atmosphere around solving these cases," he said. "We hope this will motivate people to cooperate with authorities as they see the government means business."

Some families welcome such a summit.

"I've been waiting 45 years. I'd like to put it to rest," said Henry Allen of Baton Rouge, whose father, Louis Allen, was killed in an ambush in 1964 after he told a federal grand jury a Mississippi lawmaker did not kill voting-rights activist Herbert Lee in self-defense in Liberty three years earlier.

If a summit did take place, no matter where, he would be there, Allen said. "All they have to do is let me know when or where. I'll come on over."