

# I was victimised says freed prisoner

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Government decides not to contest judicial review

An Asian man jailed for murdering a white man who he said was racially attacking him, yesterday claimed he would have been killed if he had not defended himself.

Satpal Ram yesterday celebrated his first day of freedom after spending more than 15 years in jail and waging a battle against what he claims was a miscarriage of justice. He described himself as a political prisoner.

Jack Straw, when he was home secretary, overturned a parole board recommendation in October 2000 that Mr Ram be freed. Mr Ram, who said he had been unlawfully detained, was freed after the Home Office decided last week not to fight a judicial review of Mr Straw's actions.

The government decision followed a ruling by the European court of human rights that politicians had no right to overrule a decision of a parole board to release a prisoner.

Mr Ram was jailed for life in 1987 for stabbing a white man in an Indian restaurant in Birmingham during a fight.

He maintained the white man, Clarke Pearce, had racially abused him before attacking and slashing him with broken glass. The judge at his trial had recommended he serve 11 years, but Mr Ram was kept in jail longer as he refused to admit his guilt.

Mr Ram said: "If I hadn't defended myself I would have ended up another statistic. I was primarily the victim of an unprovoked attack."

He said he was angry with meddling politicians: "The decision to reject my parole review was political. They've now conceded that I've been held in prison unlawfully since October 2000."

"I feel that the then home secretary, Jack Straw, should now be charged with false imprisonment."

He said Mr Pearce's death was "tragic" and vowed to continue fighting to clear his name.

Mr Ram said he had been victimised by the prison service: "I've had 74 transfers in the prison system, spent six years in solitary and lost both my parents. I've suffered a lot."

But Mr Pearce's sister, Jane Smith, condemned the release. "He's never shown remorse, never even said he was sorry."

Mr Ram was 20 when he clashed with Mr Pearce in November 1986. He was eating with two friends when a group of six white people arrived in the Sky Blue restaurant in Lozells, Birmingham. A fight broke out when they started racially abusing the waiters. Mr Pearce smashed a glass and stabbed Mr Ram twice in the face and in the wrist.

Mr Ram's family say he was wrongly convicted because his lawyers made basic errors during his trial. A crucial witness was not called. And no translator was provided for a witness who spoke only Bengali.