

Asian who killed man in race row freed after 15 years

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An Asian man who says he was wrongly convicted of murder after defending himself from a racist attack is to be released after 15 years in jail, the Home Office confirmed yesterday.

Friends and supporters of Satpal Ram, 36, who was jailed for life in 1987 for stabbing a white man in an Indian restaurant in Birmingham during a fight say he is the victim of one of the worst miscarriages of justice in recent years.

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

His freedom, expected next week, was a result of a European court ruling last month.

In a separate case, Strasbourg judges ruled that the home secretary had no right to overrule a decision of a parole board to release a prisoner, known as the Stafford ruling.

This is what had happened to Mr Ram in 2000 when, in an unprecedented move, the then home secretary Jack Straw reversed a parole board decision to free him. The board had said Mr Ram no longer posed a danger to the public.

This week government lawyers decided they could not oppose a court challenge to Mr Straw's decision launched by Mr Ram's lawyers. Mr Ram could be released from Blantyre house, Kent, as early as Monday.

Mr Ram's lawyer, Daniel Guedalla, said: "It does not mean they accept he is innocent and he is still challenging his wrongful conviction. This is a victory but not complete vindication. He is still on a life licence until his conviction is quashed. He lost 18 months or more of his liberty because of Jack Straw interfering."

Mr Ram was 20 and working as a warehouseman 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 the white group started racially abusing the waiters. Mr Pearce smashed a glass on the table and stabbed Mr Ram twice in the face and in the wrist. Mr Ram claimed he was then pushed up against a wall with no means of escape, and he used a small packing knife from his job to defend himself.

Mr Ram's family and supporters say that he was wrongly convicted because his original lawyers failed properly to prepare his case and made basic errors during his trial. A crucial witness who could have supported Mr Ram's account was not called. No translator was provided for another witness who spoke only Bengali.

Mr Ram has been in repeated clashes with the prison authorities and has been moved more than 65 times to different prisons. He says he has been victimised by prison officers.

A Home Office spokeswoman said various procedures would have to be completed before Mr Ram was released. "The Treasury solicitor decided not to contest the judicial review as under the terms of the [European] judgment there was no point."

The prospect of Mr Ram's release was condemned by the dead man's family. Mr Pearce's sister, Jane Smith, told the Birmingham Evening Mail: "I'm disgusted. Life should mean life. He murdered my brother."

Mr Ram's case became a cause celebre, with pop bands backing his cause.