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Tuesday, 14th September 2004

Viraj returns to his refuge

Carl Palmer

FORMER political refugee Viraj Mendis, who took refuge in a Manchester church for two years, was back in the city today - with a smile on his face.

The last time he was seen at the Church of the Ascension on Stretford Road, Hulme, he was still in his pyjamas as police carried him wrapped in a blanket and screaming "Murderers".

But today he put the trauma of that day in 1989 behind him to raise a broad grin and joke: "I've even got a visa."

Mr Mendis will be speaking at several meetings in Derby, Birmingham, London, Brighton and Ripon, but his visit to Manchester today was just to say "hello" and go back to the church where he sheltered in a room measuring 10ft by 15ft.

Before leaving to return to Bremen in Germany with his wife Karen, he said: "It is wonderful to be back here, though the memories I have are a mixture of good and bad. It is more good than sad, though, because of the fantastic support I had from many people."



**HAPPY RETURN:
Viraj Mendis with
Dean Methuen**



Mr Mendis, 47, added: "The meetings I have been attending are small scale, to talk about the drift towards war in Sri Lanka. I will be back in Manchester next Tuesday to speak at the Friends Meeting House.

"I'm hoping many of the people who supported me when I was at the church in Hulme will come along. It would be great to see them so I could again say thank you for all they did to help me."

THEN: Viraj takes sanctuary

Mr Mendis was deported as an illegal immigrant after 16 years in the country. He had arrived in 1973 on a 12-month student visa. To defy a High Court deportation order, he took sanctuary in the Church of the Ascension.

He had been an outspoken supporter of Sri Lankan Tamils and feared for his life if he returned home.

He was given refuge in the church in December 1986 by Fr John Methuen, now the Dean of Ripon, but was arrested there on January 18, 1989, and flown back to Sri Lanka.

In June the same year, Mr Mendis married Karen Roberts, one of his Manchester supporters. In 1990 Karen moved to Germany where, after six months, Viraj joined her.

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