

reduced to rubble. The school, hospital and electricity station along the main road were all razed to the ground.

No one could understand how this had happened. People had lived by the river in Swat for 3,000 years and always seen it as our lifeline, not a threat, and our valley as a haven from the outside world. Now we had become 'the valley of sorrows', said my cousin Sultan Rome. First the earthquake, then the Taliban, then the military operation and now, just as we were starting to rebuild, devastating floods arrived to wash all our work away. People were desperately worried that the Taliban would take advantage of the chaos and return to the valley.

My father sent food and aid to Shangla using money collected by friends and the Swat Association of Private Schools. Our friend Shiza and some of the activists we had met in Islamabad came to Mingora and distributed lots of money. But just like during the earthquake, it was mainly volunteers from Islamic groups who were the first to arrive in the more remote and isolated areas with aid. Many said the floods were another reproof from God for the music and dancing we had enjoyed at the recent festivals. The consolation this time, however, was that there was no radio to spread this message!

While all this suffering was going on, while people were losing their loved ones, their homes and their livelihoods, our president, Asif Zardari, was on holiday at a chateau in France. 'I am confused, *Aba*,' I told my father. 'What's stopping each and every politician from doing good things? Why would they not want our people to be safe, to have food and electricity?'

After the Islamic groups the main help came from the army. Not just our army. The Americans also sent helicopters, which made some people suspicious. One theory was that the devastation had been created by the Americans using something called HAARP (High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program) technology, which causes huge waves under the ocean, thus flooding our land. Then, under the pretext of bringing in aid, they could legitimately enter Pakistan and spy on all our secrets.

Even when the rains finally ceased life was still very difficult. We had no clean water and no electricity. In August we had our first case of cholera in Mingora and soon there was a tent of patients outside the hospital. Because we were cut off from supply routes, what little food was available was extremely expensive. It was the peach and onion season and farmers were desperate to save their harvests. Many of them made hazardous journeys across the churning, swollen river on boats made from rubber tyres to try to bring their produce to market. When we found peaches for sale we were so happy.

There was less foreign help than there might have been at another time. The rich countries of the West were suffering from an economic crisis, and President Zardari's travels around Europe had made them less sympathetic. Foreign governments pointed out that most of our politicians weren't paying any income tax, so it was a bit much to ask hard-pressed taxpayers in their own countries to contribute. Foreign aid agencies were also worried about the safety of their staff after a Taliban spokesperson demanded that the Pakistan government reject help from Christians and Jews. No one doubted they were serious. The previous October, the World Food Programme office in Islamabad had been bombed and five aid workers were killed.

In Swat we began to see more signs that the Taliban had never really left. Two more schools were blown up and three foreign aid workers from a Christian group were kidnapped as they returned to their base in Mingora and then murdered. We received other shocking news. My father's friend Dr Mohammad Farooq, the vice chancellor of Swat University, had been killed by two gunmen who burst into his office. Dr Farooq was an Islamic scholar and former member of the Jamaat-e-Islami party,