

of the army operation to expel the Taliban that we had all had to leave and found ourselves in this situation now. So Madam Maryam and I wrote an email to General Abbas explaining the situation. He was very kind and sent us 1,100,000 rupees so my father could pay everyone three months' back pay. The teachers were so happy. Most had never received so much money at once. Miss Hera called my father in tears, grateful that her wedding could go ahead as planned.

This didn't mean we went easy on the army. We were very unhappy about the army's failure to capture the Taliban leadership, and my father and I continued to give lots of interviews. We were often joined by my father's friend Zahid Khan, a fellow member of the Swat Qaumi Jirga. He was also the president of the All Swat Hotels Association, so he was particularly eager for life to go back to normal so that tourists could return. Like my father he was very outspoken and had been threatened too. One night in November 2009 he had had a very narrow escape. Zahid Khan was returning to his home from a meeting with army officials at Circuit House late at night when he was ambushed. Fortunately, many of his family live in the same area and they exchanged fire with the attackers, forcing them to flee.

Then on 1 December 2009 there was a suicide attack on a well-known local ANP politician and member of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assembly, Dr Shamsheer Ali Khan. He had been greeting friends and constituents for Eid at his *hujra*, just a mile from Imam Deri where Fazlullah's headquarters had been, when the bomb went off. Dr Shamsheer had been an outspoken critic of the Taliban. He died on the spot and nine other people were injured. People said the bomber was about eighteen years old. The police found his legs and other parts of his body.

A couple of weeks after that our school was asked to take part in the District Child Assembly Swat, which had been set up by the charity UNICEF and by the Khpal Kor (My Home) Foundation for orphans. Sixty students from all over Swat had been chosen as members. They were mostly boys although eleven girls from my school went along. The first meeting was in a hall with lots of politicians and activists. We held an election for speaker and I won! It was strange to stand up there on the stage and have people address me as Madam Speaker, but it felt good to have our voices heard. The assembly was elected for a year and we met almost every month. We passed nine resolutions calling for an end to child labour and asking for help to send the disabled and street children to school, as well as for the reconstruction of all the schools destroyed by the Taliban. Once the resolutions were agreed, they were sent to officials and a handful were even acted on.

Moniba, Ayesha and I also started learning about journalism from a British organisation called the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, which ran a project called Open Minds Pakistan. It was fun learning how to report issues properly. I had become interested in journalism after seeing how my own words could make a difference and also from watching the *Ugly Betty* DVDs about life at an American magazine. This was a bit different – when we wrote about subjects close to our hearts these were topics like extremism and the Taliban rather than clothes and hairstyles.

All too soon it was another year of exams. I beat Malka-e-Noor for first place again although it was close. Our headmistress had tried to persuade her to be a school prefect but she said she couldn't do anything that might distract her from her studies. 'You should be more like Malala and do other things,' said Madam Maryam. 'It's just as important as your education. Work isn't everything.' But I couldn't blame her. She really wanted to please her parents, particularly her mother.

It wasn't the same Swat as before – maybe it never would be – but it was returning to normal. Even some of the dancers of Banr Bazaar had moved back, although they were mostly making DVDs to sell,