

as sending a message of hope and strength to the rest of the world. She was also our only political leader to speak out against the militants and even offered to help American troops hunt for bin Laden inside Pakistani borders.

Some people obviously did not like that. On 18 October 2007 we were all glued to the TV as she walked down the steps of the plane in Karachi and wept as she stepped onto Pakistani soil after almost nine years in exile. When she paraded on an open-top bus through the streets, hundreds of thousands of people flocked to see her. They had travelled from all over the country and many of them were carrying small children. Some released white doves, one of which flew to perch on Benazir's shoulder. The crowds were so large that the bus moved at a walking pace. We stopped watching after a while as it was clearly going to take hours.

I had gone to bed when just before midnight the militants struck. Benazir's bus was blown up in a wave of orange flame. My father told me the news when I woke up the next morning. He and his friends were in such a state of shock that they had not gone to bed. Luckily, Benazir survived because she had gone downstairs to an armoured compartment to rest her feet just before the explosions, but 150 people had been killed. It was the biggest bomb ever to have gone off in our country. Many of the dead were students who had made a human chain around the bus. They called themselves Martyrs for Benazir. At school that day everyone was subdued, even those who had opposed Benazir. We were devastated but also thankful that she had survived.

About a week later the army came to Swat, making lots of noise with their jeeps and helicopters. We were at school when the helicopters first arrived and were very excited. We ran outside and they threw toffees and tennis balls down to us, which we rushed to catch. Helicopters were a rare sight in Swat, but since our house was close to the local army headquarters they sometimes flew right over us. We used to hold competitions for who would collect the most toffees.

One day a man from along the street came and told us that it had been announced in the mosques that there would be a curfew the next day. We didn't know what a curfew was and were anxious. There was a hole in the wall to our neighbours' house, Safina's family, through which we used to communicate with them, and we knocked on the wall so they would come to the hole. 'What does it mean this curfew?' we asked. When they explained, we didn't even come out of our rooms because we thought something bad might happen. Later the curfew took over our lives.

We heard on the news that Musharraf had sent 3,000 troops into our valley to confront the Taliban. They occupied all government and private buildings which they thought were of strategic importance. Until then it had seemed as if the rest of Pakistan was ignoring what was happening in Swat. The following day a suicide bomber attacked another army truck in Swat, killing seventeen soldiers and thirteen civilians. Then all that night we heard *dar dar dar*, the boom of cannons and machine guns from the hills. It was hard to sleep.

On the TV the next day we heard that fighting had erupted in the hills to the north. School was closed and we stayed at home, trying to understand what was going on. The fighting was taking place outside Mingora though we could still hear gunfire. The military said it had killed more than a hundred militants, but then on the first day of November around 700 Taliban overran an army position at Khwazakhela. Some fifty men deserted from the Frontier Corps and another forty-eight were captured and then paraded around. Fazlullah's men humiliated them by taking their uniforms and guns and giving them each 500 rupees to make their way back. The Taliban then took two police stations in Khwazakhela and moved on to Madyan, where more police officers gave up their weapons. Very