

we left them with a lot of water and corn. She also said I must leave my school bag because there was so little room. I was horrified. I went and whispered Quranic verses over the books to try and protect them.

Finally everyone was ready. My mother, father, grandmother, my cousin's wife and baby and my brothers all squashed into the back of Dr Afzal's van along with his wife and children. There were children in the laps of adults and smaller children in their laps. I was luckier – there were fewer people in Safina's car – but I was devastated by the loss of my school bag. Because I had packed my books separately, I had had to leave them all behind.

We all said *surahs* from the Quran and a special prayer to protect our sweet homes and school. Then Safina's father put his foot on the pedal and away we drove out of the small world of our street, home and school and into the unknown. We did not know if we would ever see our town again. We had seen pictures of how the army had flattened everything in an operation against militants in Bajaur and we thought everything we knew would be destroyed.

The streets were jam-packed. I had never seen them so busy before. There were cars everywhere, as well as rickshaws, mule carts and trucks laden with people and their belongings. There were even motorbikes with entire families balanced on them. Thousands of people were leaving with just the clothes they had on their backs. It felt as if the whole valley was on the move. Some people believe that the Pashtuns descend from one of the lost tribes of Israel, and my father said, 'It is as though we are the Israelites leaving Egypt, but we have no Moses to guide us.' Few people knew where they were going, they just knew they had to leave. This was the biggest exodus in Pashtun history.

Usually there are many ways out of Mingora, but the Taliban had cut down several huge apple trees and used them to block some routes so everyone was squashed onto the same road. We were an ocean of people. The Taliban patrolled the roads with guns and watched us from the tops of buildings. They were keeping the cars in lines but with weapons not whistles. 'Traffic Taliban,' we joked to try and keep our spirits up. At regular intervals along the road we passed army and Taliban checkpoints side by side. Once again the army was seemingly unaware of the Taliban's presence.

'Maybe they have poor eyesight,' we laughed, 'and can't see them.'

The road was heaving with traffic. It was a long slow journey and we were all very sweaty crammed in together. Usually car journeys are an adventure for us children as we rarely go anywhere. But this was different. Everyone was depressed.

Inside Dr Afzal's van my father was talking to the media, giving a running commentary on the exodus from the valley. My mother kept telling him to keep his voice down for fear the Taliban would hear him. My father's voice is so loud my mother often jokes that he doesn't need to make phone calls, he can just shout.

Finally we got through the mountain pass at Malakand and left Swat behind. It was late afternoon by the time we reached Mardan, which is a hot and busy city.

My father kept insisting to everyone 'in a few days we will return. Everything will be fine.' But we knew that was not true.

In Mardan there were already big camps of white UNHCR tents like those for Afghan refugees in Peshawar. We weren't going to stay in the camps because it was the worst idea ever. Almost two million of us were fleeing Swat and you couldn't have fitted two million people in those camps. Even if there was a tent for us, it was far too hot inside and there was talk that diseases like cholera were spreading. My father said he had heard rumours that some Taliban were even hiding inside the camps