

office. Our eyes widened when we saw that the army headquarters was so much neater than the rest of the city with perfect green lawns and blossoming flowers. Even the trees were all the same size with the trunks painted white to exactly halfway up – we didn't know why. Inside the HQ we saw offices with banks of televisions, men monitoring every channel, and one officer showed my father a thick file of cuttings which contained every mention of the army in that day's papers. He was amazed. The army seemed much more effective at PR than our politicians.

We were taken into a hall to wait for the general. On the walls were photographs of all our army chiefs, the most powerful men in our country including dictators like Musharraf and scary Zia. A servant with white gloves brought us tea and biscuits and small meat samosas that melted in our mouths. When General Abbas came in we all stood up.

He began by telling us about the military operation in Swat, which he presented as a victory. He said 128 soldiers and 1,600 terrorists had been killed in the operation.

After he finished we could ask questions. We had been told to prepare questions in advance and I had made a list of seven or eight. Shiza had laughed and said he wouldn't be able to answer so many. I sat in the front row and was the first to be called on. I asked, 'Two or three months ago you told us Fazlullah and his deputy were shot and injured, and then you said they were in Swat and sometimes you say they're in Afghanistan. How did they get there? If you have so much information, why can't you catch them?'

His reply went on for about ten to fifteen minutes and I couldn't work out what his answer was! Then I asked about reconstruction. 'The army must do something for the future of the valley, not just focus on the military operation,' I said.

Moniba asked something similar. 'Who will reconstruct all these buildings and schools?' she wanted to know.

The general replied in a very military way. 'After the operation, first we will have recovery, then rehabilitation, then hold and transfer to civil authorities.'

All of us girls made it clear that we wanted to see the Taliban brought to justice, but we weren't very convinced this would happen.

Afterwards General Abbas gave some of us his visiting card and told us to contact him if we ever needed anything.

On the last day we all had to give a speech at the Islamabad Club about our experiences in the valley under Taliban rule. When Moniba spoke she couldn't control her tears. Soon everyone was weeping. We had enjoyed a glimpse of a different life in Islamabad. In my speech I told the audience that until I had watched the English play I had no idea there were so many talented people in Pakistan. 'Now we realise we don't need to watch Indian movies,' I joked. We'd had a wonderful time, and when we got back to Swat I felt so hopeful about the future I planted a mango seed in the garden during Ramadan as they are a favourite fruit to eat after breaking the fast.

But my father had a big problem. While we had been IDPs and for all the months the school had been closed he had collected no fees, but the teachers still expected to be paid. Altogether that would be over one million rupees. All the private schools were in the same boat. One school gave its teachers salaries for a month, but most didn't know what to do as they couldn't afford to pay. The teachers at the Khushal School demanded something. They had their own expenses, and one of them, Miss Hera, was about to get married and had been relying on her salary to help pay for the ceremony.

My father was in a fix. Then we remembered General Abbas and his visiting card. It was because