

and harassing the women.

Those who could, stayed in the homes of local people or with family and friends. Amazingly three-quarters of all the IDPs were put up by the people of Mardan and the nearby town of Swabi. They opened the doors of their homes, schools and mosques to the refugees. In our culture women are expected not to mix with men they are not related to. In order to protect women's purdah, men in families hosting the refugees even slept away from their own homes. They became voluntary IDPs. It was an astonishing example of Pashtun hospitality. We were convinced that if the exodus had been managed by the government many more would have died of hunger and illness.

As we had no relatives in Mardan we were planning to make our way to Shangla, our family village. So far we had driven in the opposite direction, but we had had to take the only lift we could get out of Swat.

We spent that first night in the home of Dr Afzal. My father then left us to go to Peshawar and alert people to what was happening. He promised to meet us later in Shangla. My mother tried very hard to persuade him to come with us but he refused. He wanted the people of Peshawar and Islamabad to be aware of the terrible conditions in which IDPs were living and that the military were doing nothing. We said goodbye and were terribly worried we wouldn't see him again.

The next day we got a lift to Abbottabad, where my grandmother's family lived. There we met up with my cousin Khanjee, who was heading north like us. He ran a boys' hostel in Swat and was taking seven or eight boys to Kohistan by coach. He was going to Besham, from where we would need another lift to take us to Shangla.

It was nightfall by the time we reached Besham as many roads were blocked. We spent the night in a cheap dirty hotel while my cousin tried to arrange a van to take us to Shangla. A man came near my mother and she took her shoe off and hit him once then twice and he ran away. She had hit him so hard that when she looked at the shoe it was broken. I always knew my mother was a strong woman but I looked at her with new respect.

It was not easy to get from Besham to our village and we had to walk twenty-five kilometres carrying all our things. At one point we were stopped by the army, who told us we could go no further and must turn back. 'Our home is in Shangla. Where will we go?' we begged. My grandmother started crying and saying her life had never been so bad. Finally, they let us through. The army and their machine guns were everywhere. Because of the curfew and the checkpoints there was not one other vehicle on the road that didn't belong to the military. We were afraid that the army wouldn't know who we were and would shoot us.

When we reached the village our family was astonished to see us. Everyone believed the Taliban would return to Shangla so they couldn't understand why we hadn't remained in Mardan.

We stayed in my mother's village, Karshat, with my uncle Faiz Mohammad and his family. We had to borrow clothes from our relatives as we hadn't brought much. I was happy to be with my cousin Sumbul, who is a year older than me. Once we were settled I started going to school with her. I was in Year 6 but started in Year 7 to be with Sumbul. There were only three girls in that year as most of the village girls of that age do not go to school, so we were taught with boys as they didn't have enough room or staff to teach just three girls separately. I was different to the other girls as I didn't cover my face and I used to talk to every teacher and ask questions. But I tried to be obedient and polite, always saying, 'Yes, sir.'

It took over half an hour to walk to school, and because I am bad at getting up in the morning the