began to worry the militants could take over the capital. It was almost unbelievable – Islamabad is usually a quiet, orderly place, very different to the rest of our country. Finally on the evening of 3 July commandos with tanks and armoured personnel carriers surrounded the mosque. They cut off the electricity in the area, and as dusk fell there was a sudden burst of gunfire and explosions. The troops blasted holes in the wall surrounding the mosque and fired mortars at the compound as helicopter gunships hovered overhead. Over loudspeakers they called for the girls to surrender.

Many of the militants in the mosque had fought in Afghanistan or Kashmir. They barricaded themselves and the madrasa students inside concrete bunkers with sandbags. Worried parents gathered outside, calling their daughters on mobile phones, begging them to come out. Some of the girls refused, saying their teachers had taught them that to become a martyr is a glorious thing.

The next evening a small group of girls emerged. Hidden among them was Abdul Aziz, disguised in a burqa, along with his daughter. But his wife and younger brother stayed inside, along with many students, and there were daily exchanges of gunfire between the militants and the troops outside. The militants had RPGs and petrol bombs made from Sprite bottles. The siege went on until late on 9 July, when the commander of the special forces outside was killed by a sniper in one of the minarets. The military finally lost patience and stormed the compound.

They called it Operation Silence although it was very loud. Never had there been such a battle in the heart of our capital. Commandos fought from room to room for hours until they finally tracked Abdul Rashid and his followers to a basement where they killed him. By nightfall on 10 July, when the siege was finally over, around a hundred people had been killed including several soldiers and a number of children. The news showed shocking pictures of the wreckage, everywhere blood and broken glass, and dead bodies. We all watched in horror. Some of the students at the two madrasas were from Swat. How could something like that happen in our capital city and in a mosque? A mosque is a sacred place for us.

It was after the Red Mosque siege that the Swat Taliban changed. On 12 July – which I remember because it was my birthday – Fazlullah gave a radio address that was quite different to his previous ones. He raged against the Lal Masjid attack and vowed to avenge the death of Abdul Rashid. Then he declared war on the Pakistani government.

This was the start of real trouble. Fazlullah could now carry out his threats and mobilise support for his Taliban in the name of Lal Masjid. A few days later they attacked an army convoy travelling in the direction of Swat and killed thirteen soldiers. The backlash wasn't just in Swat. There was an enormous protest by tribesmen in Bajaur and a wave of suicide bombings across the country. There was one ray of hope – Benazir Bhutto was returning. The Americans were worried that their ally General Musharraf was too unpopular in Pakistan to be effective against the Taliban so they had helped broker an unlikely power-sharing deal. The plan was that Musharraf would finally take off his uniform and be a civilian president, supported by Benazir's party. In return he would drop corruption charges against her and her husband and agree to hold elections, which everyone assumed would result in Benazir becoming prime minister. No Pakistani, including my father, thought this deal would work as Musharraf and Benazir hated each other.

Benazir had been in exile since I was two years old, but I had heard so much about her from my father and was very excited that she would return and we might have a woman leader once more. It was because of Benazir that girls like me could think of speaking out and becoming politicians. She was our role model. She symbolised the end of dictatorship and the beginning of democracy as well