

quickly the Taliban controlled most of Swat outside Mingora.

On 12 November Musharraf ordered 10,000 more troops into our valley with additional helicopter gunships. The army was everywhere. They even camped on the golf course, their big guns trained on the hillsides. They then launched an operation against Fazlullah which later became known as the first battle of Swat. It was the first time the army had launched an operation against its own people outside the FATA. Police once tried to capture Fazlullah when he was speaking at a gathering, but a giant sandstorm blew up and he managed to escape. This added to his mystery and spiritual reputation.

The militants did not give up easily. Instead they advanced to the east and on 16 November captured Alpuri, the main town of Shangla. Again local police fled without a fight. People there said Chechens and Uzbeks were among the fighters. We worried about our family in Shangla, though my father said the village was too remote for the Taliban to bother with and local people had made it clear they would keep them out. The Pakistan army had far more men and heavy weapons so they quickly managed to recapture the valley. They took Imam Deri, the headquarters of Fazlullah. The militants fled to the forests and by early December the army said they had cleared most areas. Fazlullah retreated into the mountains.

But they did not drive the Taliban away. 'This will not last,' my father predicted.

Fazlullah's group was not the only one causing havoc. All across north-western Pakistan different militant groups had emerged led by people from various tribal groups. About a week after the battle of Swat, forty Taliban leaders from across our province met in South Waziristan to declare war on Pakistan. They agreed to form a united front under the banner of Tehrik-i-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP), or the Pakistan Taliban, and claimed to have 40,000 fighters between them. They chose as their leader a man in his late thirties called Baitullah Mehsud, who had fought in Afghanistan. Fazlullah was made chief of the Swat sector.

When the army arrived we thought that the fighting would soon stop, but we were wrong. There was much more to come. The Taliban targeted not only politicians, MPs and the police, but also people who were not observing purdah, wearing the wrong length of beard or the wrong kind of shalwar kamiz.

On 27 December Benazir Bhutto addressed an election rally in Liaquat Bagh, the park in Rawalpindi where our first prime minister, Liaquat Ali, was assassinated. 'We will defeat the forces of extremism and militancy with the power of the people,' she declared to loud cheers. She was in a special bulletproof Toyota Land Cruiser, and as it left the park she stood up on the seat and popped her head through the sunroof to wave to supporters. Suddenly there was the crack of gunfire and an explosion as a suicide bomber blew himself up by the side of her vehicle. Benazir slid back down. The Musharraf government later said she hit her head on the roof handle; other people said she had been shot.

We were watching the TV when the news came through. My grandmother said, 'Benazir will become *shaheed*,' meaning she would die an honourable death. We all started crying and praying for her. When we learned she was dead, my heart said to me, *Why don't you go there and fight for women's rights?* We were looking forward to democracy and now people asked, 'If Benazir can die, nobody is safe.' It felt as if my country was running out of hope.

Musharraf blamed Benazir's death on Baitullah Mehsud, the TTP leader, and released a transcript of an intercepted phone call that was supposed to be between him and a fellow militant discussing the attack. Baitullah denied responsibility, which was unusual for the Taliban.