

*does it matter?* I wondered. *The point is we are a Taliban state.*

My father was again busy speaking at seminars on our troubles with the Taliban. At one the information minister for our province said Talibanisation was the result of our country's policy of training militants and sending them to Afghanistan, first to fight the Russians, then to fight the Americans. 'If we had not put guns in the hands of madrasa students at the behest of foreign powers we would not be facing this bloodbath in the tribal areas and Swat,' he said.

It soon became clear that the Americans had been right in their assessment of the deal. The Taliban believed the Pakistani government had given in and they could do what they liked. They streamed into Buner, the next district to the south-east of Swat and only sixty-five miles from Islamabad. People in Buner had always resisted the Taliban but they were ordered by the local authorities not to fight. As the militants arrived with their RPGs and guns, the police abandoned their posts, saying the Taliban had 'superior weapons', and people fled. The Taliban set up *shariat* courts in all districts and broadcast sermons from mosques calling on the local youth to join them.

Just as they had in Swat, they burned TV sets, pictures, DVDs and tapes. They even took control of the famous shrine of a Sufi saint, Pir Baba, which was a pilgrimage site. People would visit to pray for spiritual guidance, cures for their ailments and even happy marriages for their children. But now it was locked and bolted.

People in the lower districts of Pakistan became very worried as the Taliban moved towards the capital. Everyone seemed to have seen the video of the girl in the black burqa being flogged and were asking, 'Is this what we want in Pakistan?' Militants had killed Benazir, blown up the country's best-known hotel, killed thousands of people in suicide bombings and beheadings and destroyed hundreds of schools. What more would it take for the army and government to resist them?

In Washington the government of President Obama had just announced it was sending 21,000 more troops to Afghanistan to turn round the war against the Taliban. But now they seemed to be more alarmed about Pakistan than Afghanistan. Not because of girls like me and my school but because our country has more than 200 nuclear warheads and they were worried about who was going to control them. They talked about stopping their billions of dollars in aid and sending troops instead.

At the start of May our army launched Operation True Path to drive the Taliban out of Swat. We heard they were dropping hundreds of commandos from helicopters into the mountains in the north. More troops appeared in Mingora too. This time they would clear the town. They announced over megaphones that all residents should leave.

My father said we should stay. But the gunfire kept us awake most nights. Everyone was in a continuous state of anxiety. One night we were woken up by screaming. We had recently got some pets – three white chickens and a white rabbit that one of Khushal's friends had given him and which we let wander around the house. Atal was only five then and really loved that rabbit so it used to sleep under my parents' bed. But it used to wee everywhere so that night we put it outside. Around midnight a cat came and killed it. We all heard the rabbit's agonised cries. Atal would not stop weeping. 'Let the sun come and I will teach that cat a lesson tomorrow,' he said. 'I will kill him.' It seemed like a bad omen.