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Gun culture

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

The world's shock and horror this week centred on a small Virginian university and the brutal slayings of a young loner who killed 32 of his fellow students, armed with a Glock 9mm semi-automatic handgun that he had purchased for \$571 (with a box of ammunition thrown in) at a neighbourhood store. America's quaint fascination with guns is universally disturbing. It is a national obsession that excludes a basic understanding of how the right to bear arms manifests itself. In death. That's how guns work actually.

The Brady Campaign estimates that there are approximately 250 million guns in America, just about one for every citizen. In 1993 the number of gun deaths in America was a staggering 40,000. According to the Centre of Disease Control and Prevention there were 28,663 deaths caused by firearms in the year 2000, not much of a decline at all, and since then the number of gun related mortalities has rested at about 29,000 a year. Having spent some time in the United States I can attest to how very easy it is to arm oneself with small-scale weaponry. In Tennessee while shopping at a large chain of supermarkets with my mother's sister I got lost in the produce section. I was looking for mangos and was disappointed to see only the bright red South American variety. I managed to snake my way out of the fruit and vegetable maze only to find myself in the small arms aisle. They called it the sport section. A portly gentleman in a blue vest was putting up signs announcing the new stock that had come in -- rifles, shotguns, ballistic shooting bags -- the works! And all at competitive prices. In another Southern state, visiting my other Aunt, I came across a video store on Main Street that rented blockbusters, sold and exchanged guns, and doled out free cases of ammunition with each weapons purchase.

American Federal law requires that background checks be carried out only for guns sold by licensed arms dealers, which accounts for 60 per cent of all guns bought across the country. In layman's terms that means that two out of every five guns owned by Americans are not regulated or recorded. Besides the convenience of buying your arms at Walmart and video stores, there exists a plethora of gun shows -- up to 5,000 held a year -- taking place everyday across the country where trigger happy crazies can gather and swap sniping tips while picking up a new arms cache for the year.

Before we get smug, scoffing at another example of America's banal enthrallment with weapons of mass destruction, it bears noting that our country is hardly any more sophisticated when it comes to guns. The International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) estimates that there are 75 million small arms circulating around South Asia, the majority of which remains in civilian hands across India and Pakistan. Pakistan boasts approximately 20 million illegal firearms, not including those manufactured locally. Our Kalashnikov culture, birthed during Russo-American Afghan war in 1979, and its after effects in the Northern parts of our country

are embarrassingly well documented. American forces pumped Pakistani agencies so full of weapons to combat the neighbouring Communist threat that when roughly 30 per cent of those arms went missing, diverted within Pakistan and passed around rather freely, almost no one noticed. Except the Pakistani people, of course. Sectarian outfits, religious groups, and militant jihadis have since been conveniently well stocked.

However, there is a dangerous microcosm to Pakistan's Kalashnikov culture -- the proliferation of small arms. Over 500,000 deaths a year worldwide are caused by small arms, essentially one life snuffed out every minute by handguns. According to IANSA, civilians make up the largest group of gun owners in Pakistan, far outnumbering the small arms possessed by the military, the police, and alleged terror factions. Indeed guns have a special place in Pakistan's social mythology. Weddings are announced by a few rounds being fired in the air; as are engagements and the birth of children -- it seems that no celebration is complete without a bit of gunfire being joyously invoked. Shopping plazas and restaurants have signs at their entrances beseeching patrons not to bring in pistols (or illegal liquid refreshments) and metal detectors have made their way from schools to mosques.

In 2001 the Pakistani government joined 156 fellow member states of the United Nations in signing a proposal aimed at halting the spread of small arms and light weaponry. The UN Action Programme concluding report found that Pakistan had failed to live up to its commitments, as it had made no attempt to set up a national commission dealing with our explosive production and consumption of small arms. In fact, out of the South Asian signatories Sri Lanka was alone in making positive steps, including the creation of a national focal point organisation and national commission that welcomed the participation of various civil society actors.

While the United Nations report chastised Pakistan for disappointing results, it is not entirely fair to say that nothing was done to curb the proliferation of illegal arms. As part of a dewatering campaign aimed at subduing the national Kalashnikov Culture -- we now have Kalashnikov Shariat, Kalashnikov madrasahs, it's an unlimited franchise really -- the Pakistani government undertook a two-step initiative in 2001. The first step combined a countrywide sweep with a voluntary surrender of all illegally owned arms, with amnesty ensured as incentive. According to government reports, 86,500 weapons of various calibres were rounded up. No mention was made of what the state did with such an impressive stockpile. The lack of transparency does not bode well for the project at large. It is anyone's guess what happened to those 86,500 arms; they could have been destroyed or even redistributed among more deserving militants, rendering the exercise wholly futile. The second step addressed the issuing of gun licenses and attempted to impose stricter ownership criteria. As usual, weak political will and zero transparency mired the government's campaign in criticism and it remains to be seen whether any long-term progress has been achieved. Personally, I wouldn't hold my breath.

How many avoidable deaths must we suffer before there is a collective push to ban small arms? Unlike the Americans, we are not bound by any anachronistic right to bear arms, what then keeps Pakistan and its citizens at the mercy of gun violence? British comedian and executive transvestite Eddie Izzard once quipped "America's National Rifle Association says 'guns don't kill people. People do.' But I think the gun helps".