

The Terror Diaries

by Fatima Bhutto



Fahad Pervez, PPI Photo / Newscom

Two days after a massive bomb killed 24 in Lahore, Fatima Bhutto offers a firsthand account of life in Pakistan—besieged by the Taliban, bombed by the army, and more frightening every day.

I have a pretty decent spam filter. It seems like a trivial thing to be proud of, but these days in Pakistan it's a useful thing to have. I was particularly relieved that nothing slipped through the filter into my inbox last week, when several of my friends received an email with the subject line "Please do not let these Barbaric T's take over Pakistan."

The email warned, in a way that might almost have been self-effacing, that what you were about to see was no good. "Take a peek," it teased. "And get a taste of what's coming." It was a video of Taliban beheadings in the north of the country.

Today I got another email. "New Islam in the Northwest Frontier Province" was the subject line. It was from a friend, and I opened it.

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The first picture was ordinary enough, for us Pakistanis, at least: a man with a Kalashnikov and a belt of bullets. The second photograph, a dead body wrapped in a white *kaffan*—the cotton shroud used in Muslim burials with flowers strewn on the deceased—was not worrying; local newspapers have a funereal fetish and can be banked on to throw in a snap or two of a dead body along with any obituary. But then there were the torsos, disembodied and covered in blood, the bullet-pocked limbs, and necks slit like sacrificial goats during Eid.

This is the tapestry of our lives now.

We live among the dead, and those of us who live are easy targets.

Our country, engaged in a civil war that has quickly gone guerrilla, is a violent one. There's no easy way to quantify how violent; your imagination won't take you that far. But here's a quick wrapup: We have a new Taliban, they behead people, they flog a 17-year-old girl in Swat and film her on a camcorder as she screams for mercy. We have an army that is engaged in joint aerial bombings of its own country, an army that trespasses our skies with American war planes and bombs indiscriminately, creating an internally displaced population of approximately 2 million in a matter of weeks and killing unknown civilians whose lives it covers up every day under the guise of fighting terror. We have a police force that no one feels safe around. We have a government that is made up of men and women accused of crimes ranging from murder to narcotics-smuggling, and that is holding, with the help of foreign support, an entire country in a death grip. We have neighbors that are hostile to us and we to them.

At the start of this month, Ayman Udas, a singer from Peshawar in her 30s who often appeared on Pashto-language TV and sang nostalgic folk songs, was killed with three shots to the chest. She may have been killed, the newspapers suggested, because her art brought shame to her family, a very Taliban-style revenge. Or she may have been killed because she divorced a husband and sought to marry another man. We have federal laws in this country, the Hudood Ordinances, that allow a woman guilty of adultery to be put to death. The violence, no matter where it comes from and whose philosophy or cause it espouses, is becoming identical.

On Thursday, a day after the Lahore blasts that killed 24 people, 10 more were killed in two attacks in Peshawar. And those are the deaths we know of. Our army is our only source of information inside the Swat Valley; when it says it has killed only Taliban fighters and that, miraculously, no civilians have been harmed because it is what must be the only army adept at avoiding collateral damage, it asks me to believe it. But I do not.

Henry David Thoreau, whom I studied and grew to love in college, once said, "When I hear music, I fear no danger. I am invulnerable. I see no foe. I am related to the earliest of times and to the latest."

We don't hear music anymore, not in Pakistan, and we are becoming disconnected from our time and our people. We are beginning to think that suicide bombings are ordinary, that 24 dead is not a big loss, that the sound of gunfire is harmless, like fireworks. Each side seeks our allegiance based on our fear, and they are becoming more and more frightening as time goes by.

The Taliban, who claim responsibility for this latest spate of bombings, have promised more. They say they are going to hit the capital; they're going to hit urban centers, cinemas, police stations, everywhere. The army says it needs a matter of days, 10 maybe, or weeks (just a few) to exterminate the Taliban threat, which it will also do with indiscriminant violence. And we, 180 million of us, are caught in the middle.

Fatima Bhutto is a graduate of Columbia University and the School of Oriental and African Studies. She is working on a book to be published by Jonathan Cape in 2010. Fatima lives and works in Karachi, Pakistan.