

The News International
November 5, 2006
The language of terror

A hundred beats
By Fatima Bhutto

Bajaur is almost certainly the land of the damned. At least, the forces behind the 'war on terror' seem to think so. In January of this year thirteen civilians in Bajaur were killed in a CIA operation. Hellfire missiles were fired by a Predator drone into three houses killing innocent women and children. Pakistani forces claimed they had nothing to do with the American-led assault; America meanwhile refused to apologise for its grisly mistake -- they were aiming to kill Al Qaeda's major-domo Ayman Al Zawahiri who was nowhere to be found among the bodies and debris in Bajaur. While the people behind the interminable American war machine have no problem giving their weapons of mass destruction such overtly jingoistic and bloodthirsty names as 'hellfire', 'predator', and the soon to be launched 'dragon fire' mortar which the US marine corps is developing, they seem to be distinctly sparing when it comes to describing the violence that comes with their heavy sophisticated weaponry.

The thirteen killed in the January Bajaur massacre -- the death toll could be as high as eighteen -- were not civilians, they were 'collateral damage'. Don't forget, there never was a massacre -- what a terrible word, it was in fact an 'operation'. Why apologise for an ill-timed and ill-placed operation? There was no need. The United States government not only refused to accept that they had grievously blundered, but vowed to take "tougher measures" to keep the world safe from terrorists. Pakistan insisted the Americans had promised to launch an investigation into the massacre (read: a coverup) and America mumbled under its breath that they would look into it. Ten months later no reports have been released, or even written, I would venture to guess.

America is becoming quite adept at applying the language of terror whenever it suits its interests. Those Iraqis fighting against the occupation of their country are routinely called 'insurgents' -- forgive me for bringing semantics into this, but insurgents are people who rise up against their own governments or failing that against established governments or institutions. There is nothing established or Iraqi against the America-manoeuvred government in Iraq. Rather those Iraqis are rising up against the foreign military occupation of their homeland; they are the resistance.

The French organising against the collaborationist Vichy government in the 1940s were also seen as members the resistance; they did not think of themselves as insurgents in the least. The men and women who drove the British colonialists out of the subcontinent were also resistance fighters, not insurgents. I'm also quite sure that George Washington and his ilk were heralded as freedom fighters

when they claimed independence for America in the 1700s, in modern-day America it would surely be heresy to call them terrorists or insurgents. Leaving aside the messy debate of resistance versus organised terror, the question that must be asked is, who will protect us from the terrorism of the state?

At least 80 people, students and teachers of a local madressah in Bajaur, were killed in their sleep as missiles from three army helicopters bombarded their school building in an early morning 'operation'. Those 80 dead were not even people; they were, in the popular parlance of war, 'miscreants'. Check your newspapers, there is not single story that doesn't pick up the language of terror and label those civilians as subhuman, as vermin we need to exterminate.

They may have been militants, they may have even been anti-state activists, or even fundamentalists dizzy with dreams of Islamising the subcontinent, but they were still people. It is even more important to point out that the majority of those massacred were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Many were not even full-fledged adults, but children and young men.

Early reports from the carnage in Bajaur had us pointing to the usual suspects -- the Americans. The MMA seethed and called for blood and tribal heads across the Northern Frontier burned the red, white and blue flag of Uncle Sam. But wait, cried the Pakistani government, we did it! It was us! It was our gunship helicopters, not the American ones that killed those miscreants, we did it all by ourselves! The major-general in charge of the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) - if there's one organisation that could desperately benefit from some good PR it's the army -- seemed annoyed that the credit for the Bajaur slaughter might go to someone else and made sure that everyone knew there was no foreign hand in this recent atrocity. We did it all by ourselves. It is also on our orders that journalists will henceforth be banned from visiting the area and reporting on our recent successful 'operation'. On how many fronts can a civil war be inflamed? Many apparently, and don't let those Americans persuade you that they were somehow involved. We killed our own.

The state has a responsibility, not only to speak truthfully but also to act honourably. If those madressah students and teachers were indeed planning to launch an Osama Bin Laden-style attack on free and innocent people, then they should have been caught and dealt with. Warrants should have been produced for their arrests, lawyers should have been appointed for their defence, and a trial should have been the forum where these so-called 'miscreants' were tried. Their guilt cannot be presumed atop an army helicopter. If the state can so readily abandon the precepts of justice and equality before the law, what protection do we have against the arbitrary and gratuitous violence of those in power?