

## **Defying peace - 20 million guns and hundreds of private militias**

Over the last five years , the Sindh police acquired Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) worth more than 2 billion Rupees. Its argument was simple and its evidence was heart-rending. Nearly 400 policemen of the Sindh Police were targeted and killed in the last 3 years by highly armed militants that operate in different parts of the city. Earlier a Layari based gang using rockets, hand grenades and anti-aircraft guns destroyed 18 Police APCs in a battle that lasted for 8 days.

In the middle of April, a notorious, well-known and highly patronised criminal gang operating from the Katcha Area of Rajanpur repulsed a well organised attack by a 2000 strong force of Punjab police. The police retreated after six of its men were killed and 24 taken hostage. Military had to be called in to launch operation 'Zarb e Aahan' using commando battalions, helicopter gunships and armoured amphibious vehicles. It took some three weeks for the nuclear state to force the bandits to surrender.

Also in April this year a gang of criminals gunned down 7 armed policemen in Karachi, in two separate attacks within a span of ten minutes. The culprits escaped unhurt.

These three unrelated events have much in common. They reveal the true state of organised and burgeoning militancy in Pakistan. Scores, if not hundreds of heavily armed private militias indulge in target killing, kidnapping, extortion, smuggling and land grabbing. There are 20 million licensed and unlicensed weapons in the hands of civilians to add more fuel to the fire. Ironically both the private militias and the proliferation of weapons are promoted and patronised by the state itself.

Article 256 of the constitution categorically states that 'no private organisation capable of functioning as a military organisation shall be formed and any such organisation shall be illegal'. It is common knowledge that every private militia is patronised by one or the other politician, political party, sectarian group, local landlord or banned jihadi organisation. For the state to allow all this to happen under its own umbrella and to remain indifferent till every molehill becomes a mountain is simply incomprehensible. Launching a new 'Zarb e Aahan' for every 'Chotu' of Pakistan is certainly not a scientific or effective strategy for tackling terrorism.

Likewise the state has been guilty of issuing at least 7 million gun licenses out of a total of some 20 million guns that are possessed by the civilians in Pakistan. The state has never made a serious attempt to recover illegal weapons or to verify millions of bogus and fraudulent licenses issued as bribe or patronage to cronies and militants.

Citizens Against Weapons is a group of citizens and like-minded organisations that has been advocating deweaponisation and a weapon-free society as the only solution to eliminating crime, militancy and terrorism in Pakistan. It believes in a proactive approach to weapon elimination and rejects the reactive 'disaster capitalism' model of raising walls, buying more armoured personnel carriers, acquiring more weapons, hiring more guards and building more bunkers.

As citizens for a peaceful Pakistan we propose and demand that it is time to launch a nation-wide operation called 'Zarb-e-Aman'. This operation must begin by declaring the possession of arms as the exclusive domain of the State. No citizen, regardless of his/her rank or status, must be allowed to possess, carry or display any weapon of any kind. One could begin by eliminating millions of illegal weapons by declaring that all arms held by any private individual be surrendered, following a scientific and well-planned arms buy-back program.

Simultaneously the state must order and enforce abolition of all private militias, regardless of their size, patronage or hideout location. The patrons of these gangs regardless of their status or designation must be held equally accountable and dealt with severely. It is our considered opinion that the preferred strategy for eliminating this devouring violence is to act proactively towards a weapon-free society. We believe that this is the only rout for building a tolerant and peaceful Pakistan.

The charter for deweaponisation and weapon-free Pakistan has been endorsed by Citizens Against Weapons (CAW), Citizens-Police Liaison Committee (CPLC), Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Pakistan Institute of Labour & Education Research (PILER), Shehri CBE, Shirkat Gah, Tehrik-e-Niswan, Pakistan Medical Association (PMA), Citizens Trust Against Crime (CTAC) and Children's Literature Festival (CLF).

Naeem Sadiq

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