

## **Must Pakistan continue to bleed?**

In February 2012, in response to a question raised in the Parliament, the Interior Minister informed the house that the Federal Government had issued 69,473 prohibited bore arms licenses to members of National Assembly from 2008 to 2012. That makes an average of just over 200 prohibited bore weapons per MNA. It is universally recognized that the weapons can only be used for crime and militancy, and certainly not for drafting good laws.

There are thousands of people and groups - parliamentarians, landlords, bureaucrats, retired military officers, political parties, tribal chiefs, gangsters, banned and unbanned religious and sectarian groups who own large caches of weapons. It is estimated that there are 20 million weapons held by civilians in Pakistan.

As if Pakistan has become a haven for peace and tranquility, the Interior Ministry, has recently come out with an incomprehensible decision to restart issuance of licenses for 'prohibited' and non-prohibited bore weapons. Such a callous decision can only be viewed as government's eagerness for proliferation of weapons and militancy. The blinkered government refuses to see the link between the two.

It is widely believed that not a single worthwhile measure was undertaken by the much publicized National Action Plan (NAP). The key issues that needed to be addressed were not touched with a ten-foot pole. The police in each province needed to be re-organised, re-trained and liberated from the influence of the politicians. Except for KPK, this was not done elsewhere. A nation-wide program of complete dewatering, accompanied by surrender of all weapons ought to have been implemented. This was not even considered.

The violence-promoting zealots, the hate literature and the militant 'madrassas' had to be taken to task. The text books containing hate promoting content needed to be revised. A complete ban on possession, carriage, sale, import and display of weapons ought to have been initiated. The judicial system had to be reformed to expedite justice. No such thing ever happened.

Not taking a single measure and expecting peace to return voluntarily was a sure recipe to make Pakistan continue to bleed. A parliament itself loaded with 69743 prohibited bore gun licenses cannot be expected to prefer peace over militancy. The statements of 'iron-hand', 'deep sorrow', 'strong condemnation' and 'chasing the last militant' have now begun to appear ludicrous even to school children.

No institutional responsibilities or mechanisms have been put in place and the buck seems to endlessly shift between the Interior Ministry, military, Home Departments, police, rangers, and intelligence agencies. The state's generosity for proliferation of weapons remains unchecked.

In 1996, UK banned all hand guns after 16 school children were killed in a deadly gun attack in a primary school. Within a few months it enacted a new law that took away 200,000 guns and 700 tons of ammunition from the streets of Britain. On April 28, 1996, a 28 year old man walked into a café in Port Arthur, a tourist town in Australia, and opened fire with a semi-automatic rifle, killing 35 people. The Australian Prime Minister who had taken over just six weeks earlier drew a quick conclusion. Australia had too many guns and they were too easy to get. He introduced a sweeping nation-wide mandatory weapon buyback scheme that resulted in surrender of over 700,000 guns.

Despite having lost thousands of citizens, Pakistan refuses to move one single inch on the pattern of UK, Australia and Japan. Is it because ours are the ordinary men and women who are blown to smithereens every other day? Why has the state relegated the lives of its citizens to the lottery of suicide bombers. All that appears to happen after every bomb attack is a flood of the same hackneyed verbosity and a huddle of the same top leadership - as if something had happened for the first time.

It may be best to begin the fight against militancy from the Constitution Avenue at Islamabad. The Interior Minister must resign. The honourable parliamentarians must be willing to demonstrate their sincerity by voluntarily disarming themselves and their associated private militias. Only such an eye-catching surrender (perhaps in a football field) could set the stage for a genuine national movement for peace and dewatering. The state must stop sub-letting its responsibility to private militias and private security agencies. A state that cannot protect the lives of its citizens, has no moral authority to continue its rule.

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