

## A flock of grey swans

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ON Tuesday, a newspaper published a happy, positive story about a ‘music gala’ in Peshawar that had concluded the night before. Thousands had attended the event “to celebrate the return of peace to KP”. On the day it was published, the reporter friend who had filed it was found referring sadly to the story in the aftermath of the suicide attack in Jamrud that left 10 people dead.

That, unfortunately, was not the last echo of those paragraphs about Peshawar. A day later, there was yet another ironic mention of the same story after the tragic episode at the Bacha Khan University in Charsadda in which a large number of people, most believed to be young students, were killed.

The report was only following a pattern desired to be repeated in aid of the effort for the restoration of peace. The media has in recent months been trying to play its role in re-establishing normality and the return of cultural life has been an aspect on which much emphasis has been placed.

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The strain has led to the appearance in print in recent months of paragraphs such as: “Haroon was performing the song on stage, the sight of thousands of people in the crowd singing along with him made the performance memorable and proved that life in Swat Valley, where peace and beauty coexist, had returned to normalcy.”

And “Lower Dir is celebrating its return to normalcy with a five-day peace festival organised by security forces in collaboration with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government and the Lower Dir administration. The festival started on Saturday to mark a successful military operation and restoration of peace in the area.”

“One of the main objectives of this festival is to revive tourism here,” said Dir Scouts Commandant Colonel Muhammad Kamran Aslam, who inaugurated the event. “This festival will send a positive message to people who are scared of visiting Lower Dir, he added.”

An introduction to a story by a news agency, however, sought to put things in perspective. It said: “A palpable sense of security is returning to Pakistan as a crackdown on militancy bears fruit, but critics warn the government has not taken long-term steps to tackle the underlying scourge....”

The basic questions are: when do we start to celebrate? Can the celebrations lead to retaliation? Did we go into the celebrations too early, maybe, providing the militants with an extra reason to hit back in a spectacular manner?

It is not about being afraid of the militants’ strength. The assumption is that containment of militancy both geographically and on the scale of intensity, through whatever means, should be very much part of the strategy as sustained activity directed at overcoming the threat is undertaken.

It is not as simple as a group of soldiers arriving on the spot, killing the troublemakers and asking the masses to carry on from where they had been interrupted. Doing it quietly, finishing it deeply before declaring it out aloud has its own merits. The credit can always be — should be — claimed at the completion of a task and the vows and pronouncements at the outset can cause unnecessary problems.

No, definitely not in times of war, our leaders appear to be telling us, amidst all these paragraphs, accompanied by a flurry of uplifting statements of their own. In practical terms, it would be absolutely essential that the insurgents are removed and not simply ‘flushed out’ before the party marking the restoration of liberty can commence.

To the horror of those wary that this may provoke the ‘enemy’ who may still be lurking within, the tendency in the country is to quickly declare victory.

Those at the helm of the Zarb-i- Azb operation appear to answer only half of this question. They are insistent in their assertions that the terror which is currently perpetrated in Pakistan is being organised from within Afghanistan. As has been the practice dating back to the pre-Zarb-i-Azb days and the pre-NAP days, despite reports that some kind of a crackdown is on in various parts of the country, there’s still sparse information regarding the local connections.

The declarations of victory and defeat are as vociferous as they had been before NAP. In the not-so-distant past, Rehman Malik was the man always available and ready to bravely challenge the terrorists with his triumphant declarations — at the risk of a blowback. Each one of his roars was filled with gusto and each one had that familiar ring of finality to it. “Federal Interior Minister Rehman Malik has claimed, once again, that the Taliban’s back has been broken,” says a report gathering dust in the archives.

Mr Malik’s back-breaking tradition has been proudly carried forward. In a statement made in recent months Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif said that “effective implementation of the National Action Plan had broken the back of terrorists. He said that no effort would be spared until complete eradication of terrorism and extremism from the country” was achieved.

Also “Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif has said that the time has come to root out terrorism from the country once and for all. He said that unusual situations demand unusual decisions. He said we will take revenge of every drop of blood of the APS martyrs from the terrorists. He said the day is not very far away when terrorism will be rooted out completely from country. He said that operation Zarb-i-Azb has broken the back of the back of militants”.

This is very much a standard way of trying to keep spirits high. There are aspects in an insurgency that need to be taken into account here to avoid a situation where the slogan becomes counter-effective. The voice is loud enough. In order for it to be reassuring it must have some depth.

*The writer is Dawn’s resident editor in Lahore.*

**Source:** <http://www.dawn.com/news/1234525/not-quite-normal>