

Society S.P.

Another crack at it?

IF words alone could have ensured the success of any particular policy, Pakistan would have been rid of illegal arms a long time ago. Every government at some point in its tenure cries itself hoarse over this problem. But then as the difficulty of tackling it becomes obvious enthusiasm gives way to inertia. Soon it is back to business as usual. This government has also talked a great deal about this problem. Now in an attempt to substitute action for rhetoric it is launching an arms recovery drive. This will start off with a media campaign urging citizens to deposit within a period of two weeks (but without compensation) any illegal weapons that may be in their possession at police stations or the offices of deputy commissioners. After two weeks the full force of the law will be applied to those caught with illegal arms.

Three categories of weapons have been drawn up depending upon bore and calibre. Special boxes will be provided at arms control centres, presumably police stations, where citizens could drop any information that they may have about anyone in possession of illegal arms (there is an obvious need here to ensure that this device is not misused — either by people who want to settle scores with their opponents or by the police force, which is ever inventive in these matters, as another way of making money). This campaign “in its initial stages” will not be extended to tribal areas because the normal laws of the land do not apply there. This is the usual formula but as no one is thinking of disturbing the status of the tribal areas, it can safely be assumed that these “initial stages” will be around for a pretty long time.

Anyhow, this drive seems impressive on paper. But how effective will it be on the ground? Any law is only

as good as the ability and willingness of the state to implement it. Laws which are worth their weight in paper need not exist on the statute book for all the good that they do. Given the deteriorating quality of law enforcement, what grounds are there to hope that this drive will be any more effective than the many other exercises in futility which have preceded it? The police cannot handle traffic. We know their record in the prevention or detection of criminal activity. Police investigations are a scandal. Despite the talk of police reform, we still have the same old police force. What leads the interior ministry to think that this same force will be any better at recovering illegal arms?

To its credit, the government has largely succeeded in enforcing the ban on the display of arms. But that was easy to achieve. It will be much harder to persuade people to part with their weapons hidden in the security of their homes. There is another aspect of the matter as well. The crime situation in the country, sectarian killings, religious or politically-motivated strikes and the unsavoury reputation of the police force have all combined to breed a sense of insecurity among ordinary citizens. The feeling is on the rise that law-abiding citizens must fend for themselves as it is foolish to expect any protection from the putative guardians of law and order. This feeling is a powerful incentive even for law-abiding citizens to keep arms in their possession, more so when the government has stopped the issuance of all arms licences even in cases where a genuine need may exist for self-protection. None of this means the government should not try to flush out illegal weapons. Only this that while making declarations of intent or policy it should not lose sight of the facts on the ground.