

Deweaponisation drive

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THE illicit arms recovery campaign, launched by the Musharraf government with much fanfare, seems to be moving apace so far, with June 20 being the final deadline for voluntary surrender of weapons. A peculiar aspect of the campaign, however, is that despite the blanket amnesty till June 20, raids are being conducted, with police claiming sizeable recoveries. The justification being given is that the raids are being conducted on the basis of data compiled earlier. The drive in the run-up to the June 20 deadline thus essentially seems to be directed against criminal elements, on whom data was already available. Going by this, the post-June 20 crackdown will be largely directed against "non-criminal" possessors of illicit weapons. This raises the question why the police and other law enforcement agencies did not go after these elements earlier, particularly when credible data on them was already available. This apparent lapse needs to be investigated.

The government has launched the multi-pronged drive to stem the worsening of the law and order situation. But even while the campaign is in progress, daring daylight dacoities and holdups are being committed in the country's urban centres, known for their heavy police presence, such as the Punjab capital. Collection centres across the country have meanwhile been set up to facilitate arms recovery. A high-profile awareness campaign in the print and electronic media has also been launched to drum up public support, and it has been claimed that 400 to 500 telephonic tip-offs a day are already pouring in. Here there may be a problem, as members of the public might try to settle old scores this way, by giving false information against rivals. Apart from the overload on the checking teams, careful handling of these tips will be needed, to avoid irritating law-abiding citizens with sneaky enemies. The authorities meanwhile are also focusing on *jehadi* and ethnic outfits as well as religious seminaries known to have arms caches, to induce them to deposit weapons voluntarily.

Nobody can question the rationale of the campaign. The steep rise in heinous crime has vitiated the investment and business climate, besides creating a deep sense of insecurity among the public. It also projects an unwelcome image of Pakistan abroad. Yet the cold logic of demand and supply has made the problem intractable. Despite the campaign, Darra Adam Khel remains the largest centre of manufacture and supply of illegal weapons in the country, employing as many as 30,000 skilled and semi-skilled workers. After a couple of attempts at launching the campaign in the tribal areas, the authorities seem to have beaten a discreet retreat. But the campaign needs to be pursued with determination and sincerity of purpose. The clandestine sources of illicit weapons need also to be eliminated for the campaign to be really successful.