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**Honouring martyrs, healing wounds**

Almost every week there is news of the death and destruction terrorists continue to try to cause in Pakistan – especially in the parts of the country where the mountains are so high that sometimes the sun doesn’t shine, and where the valleys are so deep that the echoes of the haunting last breaths of our soldiers don’t reach us, as they depart this world as martyrs.

I tweeted my prayers for the two sepoys that were martyred in North Waziristan last week – but as I wrote these words, I had trouble remembering their names. So I Googled: “two sepoys martyred”.

The search yielded 1430,000 results in roughly four tenths of a second. Of the first seven results, three related to the incident I was thinking of – the one last week that felled Shaheed Sepoy Asad and Shaheed Sepoy Shamim. The rest were reported on November 13, 2018; August 28, 2017; November 5, 2019; and December 26, 2019. The daughters and sons of this country have never hesitated to give their lives in the path of service to the nation. Some friends ask: “why do you tend to throw in “daughter”, or “her” into sentences?” “Why this fake feminism?”.

Shakeela from Parmoli, whilst Ghuncha from Bukki – both were also martyred last week in Swabi. Both were out administering polio vaccines to vulnerable children. There are thousands of Shakeelas and Ghunchas across the country thanks to the Lady Health Workers’ programme. Since the mid 1990s, they have been the frontline of preventative health, reproductive health, and in recent years, the fight against polio.

These women, who literally fight for our lives, stand shoulder to shoulder with their brothers in the air force, the navy, the army, and the range of paramilitary and civilian law-enforcement agencies that try to keep the peace in the most dysfunctional ghetto on the planet: South and Central Asia.

In this ghetto, the slumlords seek only one thing: rents.

To ensure that the slum dwellers and ghetto-gangsters never turn on the slumlords, they ensure that we are always too busy fighting each other, to realize the scam that is being undertaken in our names – in the names of our heroes, in the names of our faiths, our religions, in the name of God and all that is holy.

It was North Waziristan that General Shuja Pasha once famously declared had come to be “United Nations of terrorism”. It was sons like Asad and Shamim, and daughters like Shakeela and Ghancha, that paid the price to free North Waziristan from the grip of the terrorists that owned it until 2014. Don’t forget Shaheed SHO Abdul Hameed Marwat, taken down in Bannu on Saturday. Nothing can, or ever will sully their sacrifice and bravery.

But for whom was North Waziristan cleared? It was cleared for the people of North Waziristan. Because God knows, none of is about to move to Miramshah. Are you?

Dissatisfied with the quality of roads in Clifton? “Hey, I know! Let’s move to Miramshah!”. The schools here in Lahore aren’t good enough. “Hey, I know! Let’s move to Miramshah!”. Gosh, the tubewells here in Islamabad are getting deeper and deeper, and still not drinking quality water. “Hey, you know where tap water is better than Fiji mineral water? Its Miramshah!”. Of course not.

The wider region that straddles the border with Afghanistan, from Chitral all the way down to Chaman, has been in the shadow of war for four decades. The names I list above are of those felled by assailants in the fight to secure the region. What about those felled on the way here? And what about the invariable human errors that have taken place along the way? And what about the dreams quashed, and the futures destroyed along the way?

Questions asked need answers. The longer they remain unanswered, the deeper the divide between those for whom the war was fought all along (the people of the conflict affected areas of Pakistan), and those that pay for the war machine with taxes, and support the war machine with our complicated politics (us, the writers, readers and consumers of English language media in Pakistan – or what I lovingly call ‘business class liberals’).

The ultimate prize for the enemies of Pakistan comes in two shapes and sizes. The first is a massive, irreconcilable divide between ordinary Sunnis and ordinary Shias. This war has been waged on Pakistani soil, and more worryingly on the bodies of Pakistani citizens for, yes, you guessed it, about forty years. The second is a massive and irreconcilable divide between the people of Pakistan and the Pakistani armed forces. The only time in history that the enemy succeeded in creating this divide, generated two countries out of one. Now we can rub our hands together nervously and try to explain what happened in 1971, but the end result was Pakistanis killing Pakistanis.

When Pakistani dispensable Naqeebullah Mehsud was killed by Pakistani indispensable Rao Anwar, the expectation was that like always, dispensable Pakistanis will take it like they always do. Those with this expectation have not been paying attention.

The average age of a Pakistani is just under 23 years. This means half the country was born after the 1998 nuclear weapons tests. Over 100 million Pakistanis that sleep soundly under the canopy of protection afforded to this nation by nuclear technology and the men and women assigned to keep the nation safe.

Yet since 1998, there are parts of the country that have been under the shadow of war for nearly the entire time. At what point in the last quarter century, or quarter millennia, has Miramshah been a place where Pinky and Dolly, and Bubloo and Bunta could move and play at a park, or go to school, or take part in a robotics contest, or recreate a Shakespearean scene with a terrible accent? Never. It has never been that place.

Who stands up for Miramshah? The soldier does. And this nation must never forget the soldier and her or his sacrifice. But the purpose of the soldier’s sacrifice is the freedom and liberty of the people of Miramshah. And if the process of securing and delivering this freedom becomes controversial, then the response of the country cannot be to declare some, or any of those people to be traitors. The response must be to quickly and swiftly move to address genuine concerns, and to demonstrate the seriousness with which we want to build flyovers, movie theatres, coffee shop franchises, and really expensive kurta shops in Miramshah.

Those asking for “justice for Naqeeb”, or their “rights under the constitution” are not traitors. Their demands are not seditious. They are asking for this country to be the best measure of itself. To care for the people that the country is for. And to honour the spirit and sacrifice of the soldiers, the polio workers and the daughters and sons already born, and the daughters and sons to be born.

We are all one in this fight. The authorities must tread very cautiously. Forty years of damage will not be cleansed by a few military operations. The rot is deep, the wounds are deeper. Healing will take long. But it must begin. An end to the declaration of those that ask questions as ‘traitors’ is where it must begin. Bismillah.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.