



August 1995. Across the whole of the Imbo plain the standpipes have run dry. The news reaches Cédric Martin, the engineer in charge of water-supply and sanitation programmes in Burundi: the main supply lines have been sabotaged, and the water collected up in the mountains is no longer reaching the plain. This directly threatens the survival of some 75,000 people living in the patchwork of rice fields to the north of Lake Tanganyika.

In the offices in Kigali, Nairobi and Geneva, the phones are already ringing; on the other end of the line, Cédric is relaying the latest information; the only way to meet immediate needs is to bring in water by truck. In record time five tankers are mobilized and ready to take their precious cargo to ten carefully selected distribution points. At the same time Cédric is looking at alternative solutions, as trucking the water is only a short-term option. The second stage in the process will be to replace water distributions by two mobile treatment plants, to give the ICRC engineer time to plan the final phase of the programme. The ultimate objective of course is to enable the population to produce its own drinking water and become self-sufficient in the long term. In a matter of weeks, 11 boreholes 25-40 metres deep will be drilled and hand-pumps installed.

Meanwhile the tankers have set off again for a completely different destination: Mpimba Central Prison in Bujumbura. Here the water shortage is acute and hygiene conditions are appalling. Proper sanitary facilities are essential if the officials in charge are to keep the detainees in good health and avoid the risk of deadly epidemics breaking out among the overcrowded prison population.

As evening falls, the trucks are back in Bujumbura, their day's work completed. In the growing darkness, one can still make out something written on the white paintwork of the tanks: "Amazi meza", the water is good.

*ICRC water and sanitation engineer, Burundi*

*(Cédric Martin had been working for the ICRC since 1994. He was killed, together with two of his colleagues, Juan Ruffino and Reto Neuenschwander, in an ambush in Burundi on 4 June 1996.)*