

International Committee of the Red Cross

Three ICRC delegates killed in Burundi

Cédric Martin
Reto Neuenschwander
Juan Pastor Ruffino

On 4 June 1996, two vehicles of the International Committee of the Red Cross returning to Bujumbura (Burundi) were fired upon near the village of Mugina, in the northern part of Cibitoke province. During this attack, three ICRC delegates were killed — Cédric Martin, Reto Neuenschwander and Juan Pastor Ruffino.

In that area particularly affected by the fighting, the ICRC has helped thousands of people by providing water, medicines and essential supplies. Following the tragedy, the ICRC first reduced its activities in the field, in the hope of being able to resume its humanitarian action for the Burundian civilian population at a later date, but on 11 June, after receiving explicit threats against the lives of its delegates, it decided to withdraw all its expatriate staff from Burundi.

Three delegates who set a high example of humanitarian commitment

Cédric Martin, 32 years old, entered the service of the ICRC in 1994 for a first mission in the former Yugoslavia. He was profoundly disturbed to see the effects of war on the civilian population and made exceptionally vigorous efforts to alleviate their sorry plight. After a short mission in Rwanda, Cédric Martin had arrived in Burundi in October 1995, at a crucial time when both the humanitarian needs there and the difficulties encountered were enormous. Together with his colleagues, he had been

helping to set up water supply systems essential for survival and, aware of the vital importance of his assignment, he had not hesitated to take the road through the war zone.

Reto Neuenschwander, 39 years old, entered the ICRC in 1992. He gave as his reason for joining his desire “to foster peaceful coexistence among peoples and nations”. During the past four years, he had been on mission for the ICRC in Somalia, Sri Lanka, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Afghanistan, before being posted to Burundi as coordinator of relief supplies for the civilian population. Reto Neuenschwander impressed all his colleagues by the strength of his humanitarian motivation, his open mind, his professional conscientiousness and his determination to do a perfect job in every respect. Those fortunate enough to have worked with him will remember him as warm-hearted and upright, outstandingly generous, considerate, always ready to listen to others and exceptionally modest. He had become a mainstay of the ICRC delegation in Burundi.

Juan Pastor Ruffino joined the ICRC in 1995 at the age of 36. Humanitarian work, he used to say, gave meaning to his life. From his experience of life and by nature a very stable person in all circumstances, he was also thoughtful and enthusiastic, inspiring friendliness and trust in everyone he met. It was his profound wish to understand and love others — all others — and he willingly admitted that he had long suffered from “knowing without acting”. Last summer he decided “to know and to act”, and he applied to the ICRC, writing that “from Grozny to Sudan, from Timor to Liberia, the ICRC colours always stand for hope”. Burundi was the scene of his first mission. His empathy and his capacity for sharing and communicating with others made him someone whose company was sought after, a delegate appreciated equally by his expatriate colleagues and by the ICRC’s local Burundian staff.

Through the words of its President, Cornelio Sommaruga, the ICRC honoured the memory of the three delegates and voiced its admiration for the work they had accomplished. “I wish to pay tribute to Cédric, Reto and Juan, whose tragic loss has come as a great shock to me. By their work they exemplified to the highest degree those values which are the very essence of the ICRC: a firm belief in the humanitarian ideals, a sense of responsibility towards people in distress, dedication to the cause and action in complete independence, true to the principle of neutrality and upholding the independence, vital for humanitarian success, of the institution itself. (...) To their parents, their partners and friends, I once again express the deep sympathy of the entire ICRC. We share your suffering.

But I should like to thank you too: thank you for having inculcated and nurtured in these men so dear to you the ideals of humanity and the moral strength which led them to give their all in aid of the victims, even their lives. Their memory lives on. They will be an inspiration to us all.”

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