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## Wars lay waste to water

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**Conflicts conjure up images of bombings, fighting, refugees on the move and people injured and dying. But one of the most acute effects of conflicts is damage and disruption to water supplies which can have devastating consequences for the civilian population.**

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been working on the ground during various wars to help restore water supplies to people, with the help of its 100 ICRC engineers and 400 locally recruited engineers. Currently their biggest operations are in Sudan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Somalia and Afghanistan with each country presenting unique problems for engineers.

Often, urban areas present particular problems because population density is high, water systems are complex and the authorities in charge are fragmented and often do not have access to the infrastructure, says Robert Mardini, head of ICRC's water and habitat unit.

Getting technical assistance on the ground is vital in these situations to carry out the necessary bore-holes, water treatment and repairs to pipes, he says. "In the 24 hours after the end of hostilities in Lebanon last year our engineers were able to identify the sensitive points and deliver a big

generator which helped us restore water to 60 villages in the south of the country," Mardini says.

Iraq poses particular security problems for the ICRC particularly in the central part of the country where the water and habitat programme is managed remotely from Amman and other locations outside Iraq. Because the ICRC has been working on Iraq's water supply since 1991 their personnel know the local authorities well and can meet many of the challenges.

In some parts of the world the ICRC must also be mindful of the conflict that water itself can create between communities. In countries such as Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia, where water is a vital commodity for feuding communities, ensuring adequate supplies can help defuse problems. "To me a successful project [is one] that not only supplies water but that eases tension," says Mardini.

But this means the ICRC has to be careful about where it locates water points. "We have to ensure there is an agreement on a location because we need to be mindful of problems," he adds. Mardini says that the 460 water points created by the ICRC in Darfur, Sudan, are examples of where a community-based approach worked.

But with climate change expected to cause severe droughts in the future the struggle over water may become even more intense. "Fortunately today there are more examples of co-operation than war over water but water is becoming more of a reason for tensions throughout the world," says Mardini.

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