Rwanda hasn’t been to an AFCON since 2004. Two games against Mali, starting tonight in Bamako, will show how close they really are.

Stephen Constantine said recently, he has picked up some Kinyarwanda since coming back as Amavubi coach. *Mwaramutse* for good morning. *Tuza* for calm down. Tonight in Bamako, he may need the second one far more than the first.

Rwanda meets Mali in the first leg of a double-header that could decide Group K and, with it, it puts them on the brink. The return is at Amahoro Stadium on 17 November. Both sides have six points from two games. Rwanda sit on top only because they’ve scored five goals to Mali’s four. Cape Verde and Liberia have nothing.

So this isn’t just another matchday. It’s the first time Constantine’s second spell runs into an opponent that can really hurt it. The easy part is over**.**

Look at the road he has travelled. Grenada beat 4-0 and Estonia 2-0 in the FIFA Series in March. Liberia 3-1 in September, Abeddy Biramahire scoring in the second minute and Leroy-Jacques Mickels adding two. Then a gutsy 2-1 win in Praia against Cape Verde, with Claude Niyomugabo scoring just before half-time and Elie Tatou Iradukunda just after it. A 0-0 draw with Kenya followed in October.

Allow to me say; good results, all of them. But look at who they came against. Those games let Constantine rebuild a hard-to-beat mentality, he got the time to test local talent and fold in the diaspora call-ups without being punished for mistakes. Mali won’t be so forgiving especially in front of their home crowd. It’s a sharp jump in class.

Mali beat both Liberia and Cape Verde in the same group. The Eagles play at a high tempo and like the ball. They’re physical in central midfield and press with real athleticism. Many of their players come from European top flights, and the squad is deep. Pundits have made them group favourites, and it’s hard to argue.

They do have a weakness though. When their full-backs push high, they can be caught by quick counter-attacks. That’s the door Amavubi will try to kick open. Whether Amavubi have the legs and the nerve to run through it is the question, because history isn’t on their side.

Mali has never lost to Rwanda. They’ve met four times, all in World Cup qualifiers:

three Mali wins and a draw. Mali won 2-1 in Kigali in March 2013. Then came the 2021 pair, 1-0 in September and 3-0 in Kigali that November.

The only point Rwanda ever took off them came in Bamako, the same city as tonight's game was on 9 June 2013. Ten-man Amavubi held Mali 1-1, when Meddie Kagere scored in the first half. That was 13 years ago, just to remind you, Olivier Karekezi was the skipper.

In that match, Rwanda held Mali for 25 minutes. Eric Nshimiyimana (now U23 coach), was the caretaker from the Serbian Micho was sacked in April. Nshimiyimana was forced to play deep because Haruna Niyonzima was sent off in the 65th minute after picking up a second yellow card. Mali equalized 11 minutes later through Mahamadou N'Diaye.

Englishman Constantine has been here before; he knows how cruel this road can be. In 2014, in his first spell, Rwanda knocked out Libya, with a hat-trick from Daddy Birori, and then beat Congo. It looked like history in the making before CAF ruined the party.

CAF ruled that Birori, who was born in Kinshasa in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), had been playing under two identities. It is not surprising!. One was Rwandan, the other Congolese (DRC), with a different date of birth. Rwanda lost the win over Republic of Congo and was thrown out of the qualifiers. The appeal failed.

Constantine left in January 2015 and went on to coach India. Now, after 11 years, he's back, and he says he came to build something that lasts. This time, you'd imagine, the first thing he asked for was a photocopy of every passport.

Look at how he works and you can believe it. He's at junior games, visiting clubs, hunting for players from the grassroots up. That's slow work, and it won't show in one result.

Rwanda's last AFCON was in Tunisia in 2004, and it remains their only appearance. Al ong wait. That's 23 years. Now the tournament- (Pamajo 2027) is coming to the neighbors, with Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda hosting. Missing out on a tournament in their own backyard would raise a very big question about Rwandan football.

Constantine's arithmetic is simple. Rwanda likely needs about four more points from

their last four games to reach their first finals in 23 years. One point in Bamako, or a win at Amahoro on 17 November, would put them firmly in control.

A disciplined result tonight would validate his project. A heavy defeat would show how far Amavubi still are from Africa’s top tier.

An African proverb says, “However long the night, the dawn will break.” Rwandans have waited a long night. Tonight in Bamako, and again at Amahoro on 17 November, the sun might finally come up. May the best team win.