



CORINNE DUFKA-REUTERS FOR TIME

**Chapter 4:  
PROFILES OF  
WANGARI MAATHAI,  
A KENYAN PROTECTOR  
OF FORESTS AND WINNER  
OF THE 2004 NOBEL PEACE PRIZE**

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HERO OF THE WEEK  
TIME MAGAZINE  
DECEMBER 28, 1998

Her Women's Army Defies an Iron Regime  
BY CLIVE MUTISO/NAIROBI

One morning earlier this month, two rival groups faced off on opposite sides of a makeshift steel gate that barred the way into Karura Forest on the outskirts of Nairobi. Leading the group on the outside was Wangari Maathai, an imposing 1.7-m-tall woman in a rainbow-hued African print dress. She and a handful of supporters were protesting what many Kenyans and UN officials were calling an environmental outrage. More than a third of the 1,000-hectare forest had been sold off to land developers for a luxury-housing project backed by President Daniel arap Moi, and 20 hectares had already been cleared--less than a kilometer away from the Nairobi headquarters of the UN Environment Program. Violence had been in the air for weeks after protesters invaded the site and burned \$1 million worth of bulldozers and tree-cutting equipment. Police were deployed to guard the area, but on this morning they delegated the task to a gang of

200 hired men dressed in slacks, sport shirts, sneakers and baseball caps and carrying whips, clubs, swords, bows and arrows.

This menacing security force was more than a match for its opponents: 12 women, most of them elderly, and six members of the Kenyan Parliament, armed only with tree seedlings, gardening tools and watering cans. Maathai and her followers wanted to plant trees in the forest to reclaim it symbolically for the public. When she saw the force arrayed against her inside the gate, catcalling and bellowing threats, she told her group, "These thugs are spoiling for trouble, and the police will not protect us. Let's plant one tree outside the gate and leave." As Maathai picked up a 60-cm Meru oak seedling and moved toward the gate, more than 100 of the armed men surged out of the forest and began beating the demonstrators with whips and clubs. One powerfully built young man struck Maathai on the back of the head, and she fell to her knees under a hail of whips, with blood seeping from a scalp wound. Six women rallied around her, carrying her through a gauntlet of attackers to a waiting car, which drove a kilometer to a police station. The officers showed no interest in investigating the assault, but Maathai insisted on filing a complaint, signing it with blood from her wound. She was then taken to Nairobi Hospital, where doctors stitched her head and kept her under observation for three days. Altogether 10 of the protesters were injured, three of them seriously. From her hospital bed, Maathai declared, "As soon as I recover, I shall return to Karura forest, even if they bury me there."

It takes a strong person to stand up to the iron regime of Kenya's President Moi, and Wangari Maathai, 58, fits the bill. An anatomy professor at the University of Nairobi and the first Kenyan woman to receive a Ph.D., she founded the women's

Green Belt movement, which has planted 7 million trees in Kenya and inspired similar efforts around the globe. In 1989 her protests forced Moi to abandon a plan to erect a 62-story office tower in a Nairobi park. Once Maathai was clubbed unconscious by police. Another time she was arrested and placed overnight in a jail cell with no mattress. Through the years, her courage has earned her environmental awards from countries all over the world. Her latest battle has brought her powerful new allies, and no one seems to care whether she encouraged tactics like the burning of the bulldozers or overzealous followers were acting on their own. Said U.N.E.P. executive director Klaus Toepfer: "Karura Forest is a precious natural resource

that the city cannot afford to lose. The destruction of this valuable ecosystem will have serious environmental implications." UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan condemned the recent attack on Maathai, praising her role as an environmentalist. Unless Karura Forest is restored, the UN may move U.N.E.P. from Kenya. The housing project that spawned the protest is expected to collapse, since most people rich enough to buy or rent homes in the proposed development would now be embarrassed to do so. U.N.E.P. staffers are certainly no longer on the list of potential tenants. Vows Maathai: "We are not going to allow any development in Karura. If any building takes place, it will be over our dead bodies."

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**Wangari Maathai:**  
**Profile of a Winner of the Right**  
**Livelihood Award (1984)**

(from <http://www.rightlivelihood.se>)

Wangari Muta Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya, in 1940. She was trained in biological sciences and received a doctorate from the University of Nairobi, where she also taught veterinary anatomy. She became Chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and an associate Professor in 1976 and 1977 respectively, being in both cases the first woman in the region to attain these positions.

Maathai was active in the National Council of Women of Kenya from 1976 and was its chairman, 1981-87. It was through the Council that she introduced the idea of planting trees with the people and developed it into a broad-based, grassroots organization designed to conserve the environment and improve women's quality of life. By the end of 1993 the women reported that they had planted over 20 million trees on their farms and on school and church compounds.

The Green belt Movement grew very fast. By the early 1980s there were estimated to be 600 tree nurseries, involving 2,000-3,000 women. About 2,000 public green belts with about a thousand seedlings each had been established and over half-a-million school children were involved. Some 15,000 farmers had planted woodlots on their own farms.

In 1986 the Movement established a Pan African Green Belt Network and has introduced over 40 individuals from other African countries to its approach. This has led to the adoption of Green Belt methods in Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Lesotho, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and some other countries of the region.



The Green Belt Movement set itself both short- and long-term objectives. The overall aim has been to create public awareness of the need to protect the

environment through tree planting and sustainable management. More specifically, it has initiatives to promote and protect biodiversity, to protect the soil, to create jobs especially in the rural areas, to give women a positive image in the community and to assert their leadership qualities. It has made tree planting an income-generating activity. It promotes food security and assists people to make the link between environmental degradation and many of the problems they face, including poverty and livelihood insecurity.

Over its first 20 years, many of the Movement's objectives have been achieved. Environmental awareness has been greatly increased in the country, and many women's groups have sold millions of seedlings to the Movement, using the income to meet immediate domestic needs such as education of their children or investing it in other income-generating ventures. Tree planting has become an honourable activity and

many people have adopted it. Relevant knowledge and techniques have been imparted to the participants and many women have become 'foresters without diplomas'. There are now over 3,000 tree nurseries and more than 3,000 part-time jobs have been created.

In recent years Wangari Maathai's own work has focused on the human rights situation in Kenya. Standing up for a democratic, multi-ethnic Kenya, she has been subjected to defamation, persecution, detention and physical attacks.

*"We have a special responsibility to the ecosystem of this planet. In making sure that other species survive we will be ensuring the survival of our own."*

- Wangari Maathai

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## Wangari Maathai's Nobel Peace Prize

**Daily Champion** (Lagos)

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Lagos

THE award last week of the Nobel Peace Prize to 64 year-old Kenyan environmental activist, Wangari Maathai, is significant in more ways than one.

For one thing, it was the first time in the history of the Peace Prize since 1901, that an African woman has been so honoured. For another, the statement inherent in the decision by the Nobel Committee that a stable, sustainable and balanced eco-system is a pre-requisite to global peace and economic development, is

a profound thesis that should appeal to development planners especially in Africa where issues of environment are hardly factored into national plans.

Also, Wangari's award will hopefully have more than salutary effect on the consciousness of peoples and governments the world over who view issues of global peace and stability only in terms of absence of war, and not in terms of the well-being of world communities whose resources are indiscriminately exploited to feed transient consumerist demands.

It took Maathai's genius to decode very early in her active life that there indeed lay a very critical connection between forest resource depletion and the abject poverty of Kenyan tribesmen whose forests were being hacked down for timber. She could see that

the ecological base of existence of her peoples we re being eroded with each forest land cleared by loggers through, not just loss of fuel wood but through loss of the bio-diversity which the forests offered as herbal medicine, food source and general erosion of the exposed top soils.

By recognising her work of over 30 years in the re-forestation of Kenyan forests, the Nobel Committee has added another dimension to global peace studies through more active environmental concerns. Indeed in the Nobel Committees citation, Wangari was acknowledged to be a "strong voice speaking for the best forces in Africa to promote peace and good living conditions on the continent."

Wangari's road to Nobel Peace award started in 1977 when, as head of her nation's council of women, she had witnessed the rape of Kenyan forests by outside interest groups with the collaboration of Kenyan politicians whose greed was only matched by their environmental ignorance.

It was her concern for the rights of Kenyans that led her to environmentalism and natural resource conservation.

Founding the Green Belt Movement in 1977, Maathai began what turned out to be a 30-year old campaign of re-forestation by planting just nine trees! Today about 30 million trees have been planted across Africa since her campaign started.

The trees helped check desertification, promote bio-diversity, created food and jobs especially for rural women. Her recognition centred mostly on her organic view of life which included the environment and resource exploitation and utilization in a sustainable manner.

Born in 1940 in Nyeri, central Kenya, Maathai became the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree in

Biological Science from colleges in America. By 1964 she was already an academic and teaching Zoology at Nairobi University.

Her activism was not all smooth sailing or to the liking of Kenyan authorities who repeatedly had her physically beaten up, as in 1992 when along with three of her co-workers, she was clubbed unconscious during a demonstration. She has been tear-gassed, threatened with death and jailed for leading protests as happened in 1998 under former President Arap Moi whom she dragged to court to block forest clearance.

Her arguments have always been simple, logically consistent and imbued with the insight of a genius: "The environment is very important in the aspects of peace because when we destroy our resources and our resources become scarce, we fight over that."

Maathai is a true Amazon. Following a severe beating she received once with other members of her movement, she vowed from her hospital bed to return to the Karura forest near Nairobi to continue her activities which combined science with active social engagement and grassroots politics.

Wangari and her Green Belt Movement have received a lot of prizes and awards in her time. Among these are the Conservation Scientist Award in 2004' as well as outstanding Vision and Commitment Award 2002, Excellence Award 2001.

But the award of the Nobel Peace Prize is the jewel on the crown of her achievements so far.

Though only 64, Wangari has expressed no aim or desire to slow down on her zeal and passion to protect the environment. She also wants to improve governance as she has tried to do in Kenya.

Wangari's achievement is a pride to all Africans and an inspiration to other men and women to aspire and make a difference in their endeavours through dedicated service to humanity and not self.

The fact that the Nobel Committee has honoured an African environmentalist should also remind the continent's leaders that there is a close connection between poverty on the continent and resource exploitation in unsustainable manner.

This new highlighted thinking should form the background of all government

plans on the continent. Tree planting for one slows desertification, preserves forest habitats for wild life and provides a source of fuel, building materials and food for future generations to help combat poverty. Wangari Maathai has shown an example worthy of following in a continent that needs selfless commitment to save its present and assure its future.

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From a UNICEF interfaith religious service, September 13, 2001: Dr. Wangari Maathai, founder of the Greenbelt Movement, an NGO in Kenya, concluded the service by leading the gathering in a blessing of the world's children.

“Whether children build a world of peace or a world of hatred is as much a result of the choices we adults make, as of the choices they make,” she said. “Children will build a world using the tools and materials we provide them with, so let us choose to teach them the ways of peace.”

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