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UNEP Pays Tribute to Professor Wangari Maathai

Nairobi, 26 September 2011 - Professor Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, founder of Kenya's Green Belt Movement and patron of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), has died in Nairobi. She was 71 years old.

Professor Maathai was one of Africa's foremost environmental campaigners, internationally recognized for her commitment to democracy, human rights and conservation.

She founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977, encouraging women in rural Kenya to plant trees as a means of improving their livelihoods through better access to clean water, firewood for cooking and other resources. Since then, the Green Belt Movement has planted over 30 million trees in Africa and assisted nearly 900,000 women to establish tree nurseries and plant trees to reverse the effects of deforestation.

"Her departure is untimely and a very great loss to all of us who knew her, as a mother, relative, co-worker, colleague, role model, and heroine or those who admired her determination to make the world a peaceful, healthy and better place for all of us", said the Green Belt Movement in a statement.

In 2004, the Nobel Prize Committee recognized Professor Maathai's lifelong commitment to environmental sustainability and the empowerment of women by awarding her the Nobel Peace Prize. She was the first environmentalist and the first African woman to receive the honour.

In announcing the award, the [Norwegian Nobel Committee](#) said that Professor Maathai was "at the front of the fight to promote ecologically viable social, economic and cultural development in Kenya and in Africa."

Professor Maathai was the inspiration behind UNEP's Billion Tree Campaign, which was launched in 2006. She became a patron of the campaign, inspiring thousands of people across the world to plant trees for the benefit of their communities. To date, over 11 billion trees have been planted as part of the campaign.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, said: "Wangari Maathai was a force of nature. While others deployed their power and life force to damage, degrade and extract short term profit from the environment, she used hers to stand in their way,

mobilize communities and to argue for conservation and sustainable development over destruction."

"She was, like the acacias and the *Prunus Africanatrees* Wangari fought so nobly and assiduously to conserve, strong in character and able to survive sometimes the harshest of conditions. She was also immovable in the face of ignorance, political gamesmanship and wanton environmental destruction," he said.

"Indeed she risked her life and limb on several occasions to campaign and coordinate women and young people through her work in the Green Belt Movement taking her messages, her charm, her unflagging humour and optimism, conviction, honesty and intellect from her native Kenya to the highest international debates on climate change to biodiversity loss," continued Mr. Steiner.

"In winning the Nobel Peace Prize, the world caught up with the essence and life-time understanding of this special person: namely that environmental stability and sustainability will increasingly be crucial for a peaceful world and for over turning poverty, inequality and meeting the rights of women," he added.

"I am pleased that in some of the dark days of her campaigning, when not everyone welcomed her stance and commitment, Wangari was able to turn to UNEP for safety and sanctuary. She returned that support in so many ways by backing and battling for UNEP at home and abroad and by, for example, being a co-patron of our Billion Tree Campaign," said the UNEP Executive Director.

"UNEP has lost a real friend and an icon of the environmental movement. But her work and her vision will live on in the millions upon millions of people—young and old—who heard Wangari's voice, resonated with her aims and ideals and, like her, rolled up their sleeves to design and define a better future for all," he concluded.

Professor Maathai's unflinching commitment to human rights and democracy led to her appointment as a United Nations Messenger of Peace by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2009.

Testament to her ability to reach communities around the world with her advocacy, Professor Maathai was the recipient of numerous awards from governments and international institutions. She received France's Légion d'Honneur in 2006, the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights in 2007 and Japan's Order of the Rising Sun in 2009. She received honorary doctorates from several universities.

Born near Nyeri in Kenya's Central Highlands in 1940, Wangari Maathai received her education in Kenya and the USA, from where she earned a Bachelor from Mount St. Scholastica College and a Masters from the University of Pittsburgh.

She was the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree, obtaining it from the University of Nairobi in 1971.

In December 2002, Professor Maathai was elected to Kenya's parliament and appointed Assistant Minister for environment and natural resources.

Professor Maathai is survived by her three children, Waweru, Wanjira and Muta, and her granddaughter, Ruth Wangari.