Biography of Wangari MAATHAI

Kenya > Politics : Wangari MAATHAI

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Biography :

Wangari Muta Maathai (born April 1, 1940- died September 25, 2011), was a Kenyan environmental activist and member of the Kenyan parliament, was appointed Assistant Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife in Kenya in 2003. In 2004, she became the first African woman to win the "Nobel Peace Prize", for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace; for years of work with women to reverse African deforestation.

Maathai was also a human rights activist who led a group of mothers and other women to strip naked in a bid for force the KANU government to release political prisoners at what is now known as freedom corner at Uhuru Park.

She passed away September 25, 2011 at at Nairobi Hospital of cancer-related complications at the age of 71.

Maathai was a qualified professor of veterinary medicine, and was internationally recognized as the founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. The Movement is a grassroots, non-governmental organization (NGO) that concentrates on environmental conservation and community development by planting trees to protect the soil and empowers women by teaching them basic skills on environmentalism and creating jobs.

A visionary environmentalist, Wangari Maathai created a successful reforestation program that began in Kenya and was adopted in other African nations and the United States. Maathai is recognized world-wide for her achievements, although she was denounced as a traitor and a rebel in her home country.
Wangari Maathai is perhaps best known for creating the **Green Belt Movement of Kenya**, a program recognized all over the world for combining community development and reforestation to combat environmental and poverty issues. Maathai excelled at mobilizing people for a very simple goal—reforestation—which also impacted poverty and community development in Kenya. She believed that people needed to help with environmental issues and should not rely upon the government. Maathai clashed with the Kenyan government, often at risk to her own life, when she opposed destructive governmental initiatives and when she forayed into politics personally.

**Early life**

Maathai was born in Kenya in 1940. Attending college in the United States, she went on to earn a B.S. from Mount St. Scholastica University, in Kansas and a M.S. from University of Pittsburgh, in Pennsylvania. She then earned a Ph.D. from the University of Nairobi. She was the first woman in Kenya to earn a Ph.D. and at age 38, she held the first female professorship (in Animal Science) at the University of Nairobi. She credited her education with giving her the ability to see the difference between right and wrong, and with giving her the impetus to be strong.

Maathai’s life was not without turmoil and hurdles, which she described as God-given. She married a politician who unknowingly provided the basis for her future environmental activities when he ran for office in 1974 and promised to plant trees in a poor area of the district he represented. Maathai’s husband abandoned her and their three children later, filing and receiving a divorce on the grounds that she was "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control." Maathai maintained that it was particularly important for African women to know that they could be strong, and to liberate themselves from fear and silence.

Like many women in lesser developed countries, Kenyan women were also struggling with their daily lives: tending the fields without access to running water or sanitation and walking for miles in search of firewood, a situation which has been worsened by deforestation.

**Activism and Political life**

In 1977 Maathai left her professor position at the University of Nairobi and founded the **Green Belt Movement** on World Environment Day by planting 9 trees in her backyard. The Movement grew into a program run by women with the goal of reforesting Africa and preventing the poverty that deforestation caused. Deforestation was a significant environmental issue in Africa and was resulting in the encroachment of desert where forests had stood. According to the United Nations in 1989, only 9 trees were replanted in Africa for every 100 trees that were cut down. Not only did deforestation cause environmental problems such as soil runoff and subsequent water pollution, but lack of trees near villages meant that villagers had to walk great distances for firewood. Village livestock also suffered from not having vegetation to graze on.

Women in the Kenyan villages were the people who first implemented Maathai's Green Belt Movement. "Women," Maathai explained, "are responsible for their children, they cannot sit back, waste time and see them starve." The program was carried out with the women establishing
nurseries in their villages, and persuading farmers to plant the seedlings. The movement paid the women for each tree planted that lived past three months. Under Maathai's direction in its first 15 years, the program employed more than 50,000 women and planted more than 10 million trees. Other African nations adopted similar programs based on the Green Belt Movement model. Additionally, the government stepped up its tree planting efforts by twenty times.

The Green Belt Movement worked in concert with the National Council of Women of Kenya to provide such services to Kenyan women and villages including: family planning, nutrition using traditional foods, and leadership skills to improve the status of the women. By now the Movement had resulted in the planting of 30 million trees, had spread to 30 African countries as well as the United States, and had provided income for 80,000 people.

Maathai and the Green Belt Movement have faced an uphill confrontation with the previous government, which have harassed her continuously and thrown her in jail. Maathai has not only had the courage to stand up for her beliefs, but she has risked her life for her beliefs. In 1992, Maathai was hospitalized after she was beaten unconscious by police during a hunger strike, which was not the first time she has been assaulted. Seven years later, when the Movement attempted to replace trees cut by real estate developers, Maathai and her group were attacked, leaving her head gashed and many of her supporters injured. On some occasions law enforcement officers have simply looked the other way. At one time Amnesty International sponsored a letter writing campaign to the Kenyan government and President Arap Moi to get her freed. Under constant threats so serious that for a time she was forced to go into hiding, she has never given up her cause.

In September 1998, she launched a campaign of the Jubilee 2000 Coalition. She has embarked on new challenges, playing a leading global role as a co-chair of the Jubilee 2000 Africa Campaign, which seeks cancellation of the unpayable backlog debts of the poor countries in Africa by the year 2000. Her campaign against land grabbing and rapacious allocation of forests land has caught the limelight in the recent past.

In 2002 Maathai was elected to parliament when the National Rainbow Coalition, which she represented, defeated the ruling party Kenya African National Union. She has been Assistant Minister in the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife since 2003. She founded the Mazingira Green Party of Kenya in 2003.

On 28 March 2005, she was elected as the first president of the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council.

In 2006 she was one of the eight flag bearers at the 2006 Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony. Also on May 21, 2006 she was awarded an honorary doctorate by and gave the commencement address at Connecticut College. In November 2006, she spearheaded the United Nations Billion Tree Campaign.

In January 2007 Maathai hosted the Global Young Greens conference in Nairobi, where more than 120 young delegates of environmental, civil rights, peace, and social justice youth
movements as well as youth organisations of green parties from all over the world are expected to come.

On January 28, 2007, Maathai returned to Benedictine College for the first time in over 15 years and spoke to the students at her alma mater.

She also endorsed the Forests Now Declaration, calling for new market-based mechanisms to protect forests.

In 2008, she will co-host the Global Greens Nairobi conference, which is expected to draw over 1,000 Greens from dozens of Green Parties around the planet.

Her autobiography, Unbowed: One Woman’s Story, was released in September 30, 2006.

Nobel Peace Prize

“Maathai stood up courageously against the former oppressive regime in Kenya” the Norwegian Nobel Committee said in a statement announcing her as the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner. “Her unique forms of action have contributed to drawing attention to political oppression - nationally and internationally. She has served as inspiration for many in the fight for democratic rights and has especially encouraged women to better their situation.”

Controversy

Maathai caused a stir among media commentators when, at a press conference following the announcement of the Nobel award, she spoke out in favor of the claim that the HIV virus was the product of bio-engineering, and then released in Africa by unidentified Western scientists as a weapon of mass destruction to “punish Blacks”. The claim is supported by only a small minority, and is one of many AIDS conspiracy theories. She has since backed away from a definitive position, saying “I do not know anything about the origin…. I hope one day we shall know, because that of course is something we all want to know, is where the disease comes from.”

Awards

Among the many prizes and recognitions bestowed upon her is the 1991 Goldman Environmental Prize, one of the most prestigious in the world. In that same year she also received the United Nations Africa Prize for Leadership. She received the Edinburgh Medal in 1992, and in 1997, she was elected by Earth Times as one of 100 persons in the world who have made a difference in the field of environmentalism. And what a difference she has made. 2004, Sophie Prize which is (an international environment and development prize). 2004, Nobel Peace Prize

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