

Green Belt Uprising

Kenyan Kaos in Karura



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Kenya's Green Belt Movement was founded in 1977 by Nairobi University professor Wangari Maathai. It has campaigned to restore Kenya's rapidly diminishing forests through the empowerment of rural women. As the forests retreat, women are forced to travel ever greater distances to find the increasingly scarce water and firewood. Green Belt tackled these twin problems by helping the women to plant trees for firewood, and paying them for each one that survived—giving them an independent income into the bargain, when men had previously had exclusive control over family money. This has been an enormous success, with up to 20 million trees planted to date.

Maathai has also been a strong critic of the Kenyan dictator Daniel arap Moi and his corrupt development practices, suffering police beatings and imprisonment as a result of her stand. She has been instrumental in the protection of some of Nairobi's last remaining open spaces—notably Jevanjee Gardens, Uhuru Park and now the Karura Forest. Practitioners of ecological restoration and conservation in the West have a lot to learn from Green Belt's overtly political approach to environmental destruction.

Oct 7th 1998: The Green Belt Movement organised an invasion of the site of a luxury housing devel-

opment in the 14,000 acre Karura Forest on the outskirts of Nairobi (see pictures below). The land was transferred to private developers by President arap Moi in a corrupt move to raise funds for the Presidential elections. Some of the site's 50 armed guards threw down their weapons and fled—the rest held the manager hostage for an hour while 500 people burnt the site offices, several earth-moving machines, a truck, concrete mixer and construction materials, causing \$1 million in damage. They also obliterated drainage channels, began to return the land to its original contours and planted over 2000 trees on site. A further 8000 have been planted since and are being tended by Green Belt. One participant said that "This is the power of the people. They have decided and there is no turning back ... the time for silence and inaction is over." According to another, "Kenyans are fed up ... and are prepared to do anything to reclaim their land." (From *EF! Journal*, December/January 1999.)

February 1999: Nairobi University students and others fought three days of pitched battles with riot police over the development of the Karura Forest and government corruption. They barricaded one of Nairobi's main highways, attacked police with shouts of "va hii ghasia" ("kill the garbage"), stoned cars and set some on fire. Three MPs were arrested and charged with inciting violence, while Wangari Maathai (having been beaten in January when she tried to plant saplings in the Forest) barricaded herself in her own home to avoid being arrested as well. (*The Independent on Sunday*, 7/2/99.)

