

African woman wins Nobel Peace Prize: Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai

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Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai, whose tree-planting movement defied political leaders, was praised by Samuel Kobia, the World Council of Churches' general secretary—and a fellow Kenyan—for being named the Nobel Peace Prize winner for 2004.

"Being the first African woman in history to receive this prestigious prize, you have brought honor to the African continent and its people," said Kobia, a Methodist minister who in January became the first African to lead the worldwide ecumenical church alliance.

Maathai, 64, now Kenya's deputy environment minister, was named the winner of the prize for her leadership of the Green Belt Movement, which has sought to empower women, improve the environment and fight corruption in Africa for almost 30 years. She challenged policies of Kenya's former government, led by President Daniel Arap Moi before he stepped down after elections in 2002.

"We believe that Maathai is a strong voice speaking for the best forces in Africa to promote peace and good living conditions on that continent," the Nobel committee said in its citation. The peace prize will be awarded December 10.

Maathai was Nairobi University's first woman professor before she left full-time academic life to found the Green Belt Movement, a women's environmental group fighting the clearing of forests for charcoal and property development. "Your campaign against deforestation across Africa is a unique contribution not only to save African forests, but also African lives," Kobia said.

Maathai was a keynote speaker in 1979 at a major World Council of Churches conference in Boston on "Faith, Science and the Future." The onetime Anglican, said now to be Catholic, recently contributed a chapter to a new book, *Healing God's*

Creation (Morehouse).