

Tribute to Professor Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Laureate
Video Message by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
To Collaborative Partnership on Forests Opening of Forest Day 5
December 4, 2011, Durban, South Africa

Dear Friends,

Superlatives spring to mind when the name Wangari Muta Maathai is uttered: first African woman Nobel Peace Prize Laureate; vigorous and fearless campaigner for environmental conservation; trailblazing activist and champion for women's rights; courageous, tenacious and exemplary role model; strong African Sister... The list is long; I could go on.

We tend to believe that such larger-than-life icons live forever. But, sadly, for all of us on God's good Earth, death brings down the final curtain. All the same, news of Wangari's passing, on September 25th, struck a major blow to my heart, for I saw in her a kindred spirit, no doubt because of the parallels in our experiences.

In politics, we both paid a high price for our beliefs. Wangari Maathai endured being whipped, tear-gassed and threatened with death for her devotion to Africa's forests and for campaigning against deforestation. In my own case, for mounting a political challenge to a military regime, I was mistreated, imprisoned, and sentenced to ten years at hard labor.

In East Africa, Wangari's Green Belt Movement helped save Kenya's environment through the planting of trees which, in turn, provided a source of income and empowerment for women. Her Movement spread to other African countries through the Pan African Green Belt Network and resulted in the planting of tens of millions of trees.

My approach, here on the West Africa Coast, has been to empower women as well, under the umbrella of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund, by improving the conditions in which a large percentage of our women earn their living, and through literacy programs for women and girls. Indeed, Wangari honored us

by serving as an Honorary Co-Chair of the Fund's International Advisory Committee.

Wangari's Green Belt Movement helped preserve our environment, and she leaves a legacy that will live on. After Wangari, Kenya, indeed the world, can never return to the days of wanton disregard for the land through deforestation, because we know the consequences of such destructive actions. Today, because of Wangari Maathai, an environmental consciousness has taken root, and many more hectares of land are planted with trees, forming an environmental Green Belt across nations, and contributing to a greener, cleaner planet.

It is noteworthy that, 12 days after her passing, the Norwegian Nobel Committee named three women, including me, as recipients of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, in essence passing the torch from Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate and the first African woman to be so honored, to two African and one Yemeni to continue the struggle for women's equality and empowerment. For, as the Nobel Committee recognized, in awarding this year's Peace Prize, "We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society."

Wangari Maathai was laid to rest on Saturday, October 8th. That this most powerful of voices, this "hummingbird," has been stilled is an incalculable loss to our planet, to women everywhere, and most especially to the women of Africa. We will miss our Sister for the selfless individual that she was, and for the remarkable work she carried out on behalf of the environment, women's rights and women's participation.

May her soul, and the souls of all the dear departed, rest in perfect peace.