

Environ
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Kenya's Maathai wins Nobel Peace Prize

OSLO, Oct 8: Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday, honoured for fighting poverty by trying to save the continent's shrinking forests.

"It cannot get any better than this — maybe in heaven," Maathai said of the prize. She wept with delight and celebrated by planting a tree in her home town of Nyeri in the shadow of Mount Kenya, Africa's second highest peak.

The award, the first Nobel given to an environmentalist, marks a new interpretation of the 1895 will of Swedish philanthropist Alfred Nobel which set up the prizes.

CRITICISM: Some critics said the green theme betrayed mainstream peacemakers, but the Norwegian Nobel Committee defended its decision.

"Peace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment," committee head Ole Danbolt Mjoes said.

"We have emphasized the environment, democracy building and human rights and especially women's rights," he said of the prize. "We have added a new dimension to the concept of peace."

The prize, worth 10 million Swedish crowns (\$1.36 million), will be presented in Oslo on Dec 10.

Maathai's Green Belt Movement, comprised mainly of women, says it has planted 30 million trees across Africa to combat creeping deforestation that often deepens poverty.

Mjoes said the movement also worked for family planning, nutrition and the fight against corruption in Kenya that has allowed the felling of

vast tracts of forests.

SEEDS OF PEACE: Maathai, 64, who is Kenya's deputy environment minister, said her grassroots movement could be a pre-emptive strike to safeguard peace.

"Many wars in the world are actually fought over natural resources," she told NRK Norwegian radio. "In managing our resources ... we plant the seeds of peace, both now and in the future."

But some were unconvinced.

"You don't give the Nobel chemistry prize to a professor in economics," said Carl Hagen, leader of Norway's opposition far-right Progress Party. "A peace prize should honour peace, not the environment."

"This prize could be positive in expanding the concept of security, but it could also mean a dilution of the prize, moving too far away from the

original idea," said researcher Espen Barth Eide at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

He had tipped the U.N. nuclear watchdog and its head, Mohamed ElBaradei, for the award to reflect global fears that terrorists or rogue states might obtain nuclear arms.

But others argued that environmental degradation posed a huge long-term threat to life on earth.

"Understanding is growing throughout the world of the close links between environmental protection and global security," said Klaus Toepfer, head of the Nairobi-based U.N. Environment Programme. He called Maathai "Africa's staunchest defender of the environment".

Planting trees slows desertification, preserves forest habitats for wildlife and provides a source of fuel,

building materials and food for future generations. Forests also absorb rainfall, regulating flows in rivers vital for farms.

In addition, trees soak up carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas blamed for global warming. U.N. experts say global warming may threaten more frequent catastrophes in coming decades with floods, desertification and rising sea levels.

"It's a happy day for every blade of grass in Africa," said South African anti-AIDS campaigner Zackie Achmat, who had been among the candidates for the prize.

Maathai is the 12th woman peace laureate since the first award was made in 1901. The last African laureate was U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, of Ghana, in 2001. The 2003 prize also went to a woman, Iranian

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human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi.

Annan "warmly congratulates Ms. Maathai on this richly earned recognition, and hopes this timely award will bring new urgency to the causes to which she has devoted her life," his spokesman said, calling her "selfless and steadfast."

Maathai is a zoology professor who rose to international fame for campaigns against government-backed forest clearances in Kenya in the late 1980s and 1990s.

In 1989 Maathai's protests forced then President Daniel arap Moi to abandon a personal plan to erect a 62-storey office tower in a Nairobi park. In 1999 she was beaten and whipped by private security guards during a demonstration against the sale of forest land near the capital Nairobi. —Reuters