

"I am certain I was not born to spend my entire life at the front line, fighting battles which never seem to end." --Wangari Maathai

On Tuesday, 3rd of March, Wangari Maathai, the well known activist and environmentalist and founder of the Greenbelt Movement of Kenya, was one of a group of women clubbed unconscious by riot police after holding a peaceful hunger strike to demand freedom for political prisoners in Nairobi. The incident comes only a few weeks after



Maathai had been released on bail following a court case in which she was charged with having spread false rumors: Maathai had participated in a meeting in January in which the public was warned that President Daniel Arap Moi was possibly planning to turn the government over to the military in order to prevent multiparty elections. At her trial it was reported that Maathai was in bad shape after her stay in prison. Despite a history of heart trouble and arthritis, she had been forced to sleep on the floor of a cold cell without a mattress or blanket; her requests to see a doctor had been refused.

Wangari Maathai was Kenya's first female PhD, and at 38, the first female professor at Nairobi University. She married a young politician who promised, in elections in 1974, to plant trees in a slum area in his constituency. She decided to keep the pledge, and, after several false starts, Maathai began to build a mass movement. She soon found that newly-planted trees left in the care of officialdom quickly perished, while those looked after by local women flourished. Women are paid a small fee for every tree they


plant that survives three months; often this is their only cash income.

Fifty thousand women have now been involved in Maathai's Green Belt Movement, planting 10 million trees. Following her example, the government increased its spending on tree-planting twentyfold in just four years, and 12 other African countries be-

gan similar movements.

Poor women are now harvesting fuel wood and fruit from their own trees, and springs have returned to dry land. The movement, working with the National Council of Women of Kenya, also teaches good nutrition with traditional foods, promotes family planning, campaigns to improve the status of women and helps them to become effective leaders in their communities. And, for many years, Maathai has been bravely denouncing official corruption.

While Maathai has become increasingly unpopular with her own country's establishment, her reputation has grown overseas. Last year she won The Hunger Project's Africa Prize and the Goldman Award for environmental activity.

Women's organizations and other concerned groups are rallying to support Wangari Maathai and urging their respective governments to intercede with President Moi to secure the safety and freedom of one woman who has done so much for women and the environment. 

Action Alert

Send your letters of protest to the Kenyan president immediately and to your national government and your embassy in Nairobi in order to secure the safety and freedom of all our fellow sisters who have been harrassed, arrested or imprisoned on the issue. Notify other organizations and contacts nationally and internationally.

Please send copies of your protest letter to: The Standard, P.O. Box 30080, Nairobi; Society Magazine, P.O. Box 12868, Nairobi; Weekly Review, P.O. Box 42271, Nairobi; Attorney General, P.O. Box 40112, Nairobi. 