The Green Belt Movement defends the Karura Forest in Nairobi, Kenya, 1998-1999

- *(mainly or initiated by) women* [1]
- *an example of paradox of repression* [2]
- *included participation by more than one social class* [3]

**Timing**
28 September 1998 to 16 August 1999

**Location and Goals**
Country: Kenya
Location City/State/Province: Nairobi

**Goals:**
To protect the Karura forest from development, and reclaim the lands cleared for development before the start of the campaign.

**Methods**
Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Billboard
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 029. Symbolic reclamations › planting of trees
- 033. Fraternization
- 050. Teach-ins
- 170. Nonviolent invasion › planting of trees on development sites.

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Billboard
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 029. Symbolic reclamations › planting of trees
- 170. Nonviolent invasion › planting of trees on development sites.

Methods in 3rd segment:
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
  • 010. Newspapers and journals
  • 029. Symbolic reclamations

Methods in 4th segment:

• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
  • 010. Newspapers and journals
  • 029. Symbolic reclamations

Methods in 5th segment:

• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
  • 010. Newspapers and journals
  • 029. Symbolic reclamations

Methods in 6th segment:

• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
  • 010. Newspapers and journals
  • 029. Symbolic reclamations

Segment Length:
2 months

Classifications
Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Environment
Group characterization:

• Ecologists
• students
• villagers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
Wangari Maathai
Partners:
The Green Belt Movement, United Nations Environmental Programme, Kenya Human Rights Commission, Friends of the Forest, Opposition members of Parliament
External allies:
U.S. Ambassador
Involvement of social elites:
Opposition Members of Parliament
Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:
  - The Green Belt Movement (ecologists)
  - Villagers
Groups in 2nd Segment:
  - International Observers and Human rights groups
  - Journalists
  - Students
  - United Nations Environment Programme
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length:
2 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
Police, Developers, Kenyan Government
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not Known
Campaigner violence:
Students of the University on Nairobi rioted independently of the Green Belt Movement's campaign.
Repressive Violence:
Private security guards beat Green Belt Movement members for planting trees, and police beat University students as they attempted to force their way through the forest gate.

Success Outcome
Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points
Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Total points:
10 out of 10 points

The Karura forest is an urban 2500 acre forest in Nairobi. The Kenyan government had a common practice of land grabbing or secretly selling public lands to private companies and political allies. Wangari Maathai, who later was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, mobilized the Green Belt Movement to action when
developers began to clear sections of the Karura forest to build luxury homes and offices for political allies of the government in 1998.

On 28 September, Wangari Maathai wrote a letter to the attorney general asking to halt destruction of the Karura forest and notified the press. The *Daily Nation* newspaper hired a helicopter to take aerial photographs of the cleared sections of the forest, and published them on the front page.

Wangari Maathai and her organization, the Green Belt Movement, stated to the government that they planned to reclaim the lost forest by planting trees. On their first visit to the forest, they arrived at a construction site where they found tractors, housing for construction workers, and a group of young men. When they began planting trees the group of young men attacked them with machetes and uprooted all the trees the Green Belt Movement had planted. Construction workers arrived at the scene and saved the Green Belt Movement demonstrators from harm.

Green Belt Movement members continued to visit the Karura forest inviting the press to join them and established a tree nursery inside the forest. They sometimes succeeded in persuading construction workers to let them plant trees after explaining the environmental importance of the forest and that it was being destroyed so the wealthy could live there; the construction workers were victims, too.

On 7 October, Green Belt Movement members returned to the construction site with members of the press to plant trees, and burned the construction equipment at construction worker housing. No one was hurt.

The Green Belt Movement announced plans to return to the forest on 17 October to water the seedlings in the nursery they established, but were denied access by police. A fence had been erected around the forest with a sign reading “Private Property.” Police guarded every entrance. Green Belt Movement demonstrators entered the forest through the unguarded marsh at the north of the forest. The police escorted the demonstrators out of the forest allowing Wangari Maathai to finish watering the trees in the nursery.

The campaign to protect the Karura garnered international attention and received the support of the United Nations Environment Programme. On 5 December the Green Belt Movement invited delegates from Europe, Africa and the Americas attending the Euro-African Green Conference in Nairobi to visit their nursery in the Karura forest and plant trees there. They gave notice of their visit to the police who met but did not stop the demonstrators.

The government then told those it sold land to that they were responsible for the security of their plots. Cautious of confrontations with armed guards, the Green Belt Movement decided not to attempt to enter the forest, but to plant symbolic trees at the gate on 8 January 1999. Green Belt Movement members were accompanied by journalists, Parliament members, international observers, members of human rights watch organizations, and affiliated organizations.

200 guards armed with machetes, whips, pangas, and bows and arrows attacked the demonstrators and observers when they planted trees at the gate. Green Belt Movement members instructed the group to run from violent confrontations. The guards did not follow, but Wangari Maathai and observers were injured, many suffering broken limbs. No one was killed.

The police made no arrests, arguing that the demonstrators had entered private property. It was reported that the police conversed with the guards before the attack.

The attack was condemned by the U.S. ambassador, Kenyan clergy, opposition members of Parliament, the
press, and the United Nations. The president countered that development of the Karura forest was the way of the future, as the rest of Nairobi had been built on cleared forest.

Outrage over the 8 January attack provoked students at the University of Nairobi to protest independently of the Green Belt Movement. Students rammed the gate to the Karura forest with a tractor, and were beaten by police even after fleeing to the United Nations Environmental Programme headquarters. Two students were hospitalized with serious injuries. The next day students rioted shutting down the University.

Green Belt Movement members continued to visit the Karura forest to plant trees. On 16 August 1999 the President banned the allocation of public land. Development in the forest ceased and the security guards were removed. Logging of the forest continued until a new government was elected in 2002, and a partnership was made to restore the Karura Forest.

Research Notes

Influences:

Earlier campaigns by Wangari Maathai: the protest against the Times Tower Complex to be built in Uhuru park (which did not use Nonviolent Direct Action), and the campaign to release political prisoners (see Kenyan mothers win release of political prisoners and press for democratic reform, 1992-1993)

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Jonathan White, 14/03/2013

Back to top

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

Copyright Swarthmore College.

Creative Commons License
Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

Original website design and artwork created by Daniel Hunter.
Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu.
Registered users can login to the website.


Links:
[1] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-women
[3] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/included-participation-more-one-social-class