

CS Keriko Tobiko, Deputy Chief of Defense Forces, Executive Director of UN Habitat, Board Members of the Green Belt Movement, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, all protocol observed. Good morning.

Welcome, again, one and all, to Michuki Memorial Park and thank you for joining us at one of our most favorite events in the Green Belt Movement's annual calendar.

Today is truly a special day when we honor Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Professor Wangari Maathai, beloved daughter of Kenya, who blazed the trail for environmental conservation, and advocated for the protection of human rights and women's equality around the world. The day provides us an opportunity to reflect on her legacy and for each and every one of us to consider our individual and collective responsibilities in building upon the foundation she left behind.

Prof, as she was fondly known by many who knew and worked with her, was a woman ahead of her time. She understood the link between environmental degradation and poverty, a relationship she very forcefully and powerfully spoke about at every opportunity. This was her mission and *raison d'être* when she founded the Green Belt Movement over 40 years ago. Since then, we have come to understand much more completely the connection between deforestation and energy access, how a lack of alternatives to wood fuel for heating or cooking can drive forest destruction and increase communities' vulnerabilities to the effects of climate change and famine, how development pursued without concern for the fair distribution of benefits and costs can force an inequitable share of the burden of environmental risks upon the most marginalized and disempowered members of our communities, and that without fair and meaningful participation in environmental decision-making the capacity of communities and individuals to function and flourish in society is compromised.

Prof was keenly aware of the link between our actions and the quality of the environment in which we live, learn, and work, knowledge that continues to influence generations of environmentalists and policymakers. All of us here today understand that we are facing some of the most critical environmental challenges of our time, issues that threaten our health, our wellbeing, our very existence. On this day, when Africans across the continent also celebrate Africa Environment Day, not only do we recall Prof's incredible vision and foresight, her unshakeable tenacity and resilience, and her unparalleled bravery, we must also ask ourselves: if Prof were here today, what would she do?

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year's Wangari Maathai Day theme is: "Reimagine the Future: Clean and Green Cities for All. Build. Back. Better!" Today and for the rest of the year, we recognize the immense value of public green spaces in towns and cities globally.

55% of the world's population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 68% by 2050. Our continent will continue to have the fastest urban growth in the world, projected to double between now and 2050. Two-thirds of this growth will be absorbed by urban areas. And in thirty years, Africa's cities will be home to an additional 950 million people.

Nairobi's growth is illustrative of the rapid urbanization taking place across the country. From a population of 2 million a decade ago, Nairobi's population today is over 4 million, and is expected to increase to 8.5 million by 2035. Given that over 60% of Nairobi residents live in informal settlements, the only way many of them can experience the natural environment is in shared public spaces and urban parks.

This past year, the Covid-19 global pandemic has demonstrated that clean, green spaces are fundamental to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of all residents. We know from our partners and colleagues who manage Uhuru Park, Karura Forest, The Arboretum, Ololua Park, City Park and, of course, Michuki Park, among others, that ever since the onset of the pandemic, thousands of Nairobi residents have flocked to these parks every month. Public parks and other green spaces, which have always served as valuable recreational spaces, are a literal lifeline to city and town residents throughout the country. In line with the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, public green spaces need to be at the heart of urban planning.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Look around you: Michuki Park is a gem. It changed from an eyesore to a sight for sore eyes. We did that. We applaud the National and county governments and other stakeholders who were involved in the restoration of this space. What an incredible accomplishment. And in the same way that GBM worked with our partners in the government, civil society and the private sector to restore this park, we are committed to the protection and preservation of green spaces in urban centers throughout the country, indeed the "green renaissance" that the honorable CS speaks about so eloquently.

In 2019, with our partners in civil society, the Green Belt Movement formed the Daima Green Spaces Coalition for exactly this purpose: to advocate most immediately on the issue of the expressway and, more broadly, for the value of urban green spaces and the need to protect them. We are not anti-development at all. We are for socially-just, climate-smart development. Proudly, the coalition's efforts have been an inspiration

across the country and we acknowledge Kisumu County government for recently taking up the initiative to green their highways, roundabouts, and revamp their parks.

Furthermore, I would like to encourage each of us as individuals and in our official capacities to take an active role in the protection of existing public spaces within our neighborhoods. Dandora Transformation League, Komb Green Solutions, Pwani Youth Network, and many other youth groups across our country are already setting the pace. Additionally, I would like to recognize the different community forest associations and other civil society groups watching over some of our green spaces including the Friends of Karura Forest Community Association, Friends of Nairobi Arboretum, and Friends of City Park Nairobi. We need more trees, more public playgrounds, more public parks, in every city and town in Kenya.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Green Belt Movement remains committed to the protection and restoration of public forests throughout the country. We want to take this opportunity to thank our partners and friends, both locally and internationally, for their unwavering support of our mission. Last year, despite the covid 19 pandemic, we planted over 890,000 trees, restoring over 170ha and impacting hundreds of households across the Mau and Mt. Elgon water towers.

As we embark on the upcoming planting season with the commencement of the long rains in the next few weeks, we encourage each of you, in your own neighborhood, or in your shamba, to plant a tree or two. As Prof so memorably said: "Until you dig a hole, you plant a tree, you water it and make it survive, you haven't done a thing. You are just talking."

Finally, we would like to end with a clarion call from our founder, because her words today are as meaningful as they were when she first uttered them years ago. She said, and I quote: "We have a responsibility to protect the rights of generations, of all species, that cannot speak for themselves today. ...We owe it to ourselves and to the next generation to conserve the environment so that we can bequeath our children a sustainable world that benefits all."

From the board, members and staff of the Green Belt Movement, we say thank you for joining us today and may you have a wonderful Wangari Maathai Day!