Deforestation: Did Ethiopia plant 350 million trees in a day?

11 August 2019

Ethiopia says it planted more than 350 million trees in just one day which, if verified, would be a world record.

But is such a feat even possible?

We've been looking at the numbers.

Why plant trees?

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed launched the £1.1bn tree planting project earlier this year to tackle deforestation and climate change.

The United Nations says forest cover in Ethiopia fell from 35% of total land area in the early 20th Century to a little above 4% by the 2000s.

The initial target was to plant 200 million tree saplings in 12 hours on 29 July, but Dr Getahun Mekuria, the Innovation and Technology minister, said the country ended up planting more than 350 million tree seedlings.
Their aim is to plant 4.7 billion trees by October this year.

How was it organised?

The handing out of the seedlings to volunteers across the country was completed three days before the event, the government says.

Some government employees were given the day off to help and officials from the UN, African Union and foreign diplomats also took part.

Most of the seedlings were of an indigenous species, but there were also fruit trees such as the avocado.

Officials were assigned to count the seedlings being planted by volunteers, reported the BBC's Kalkidan Yibeltal in the capital, Addis Ababa.

Ethiopia has lost lots of its natural forests

So how likely is it that such a high number of trees were planted?

An expert said it is possible but only with proper planning.

"It is not impossible, but it would take a very well-organised effort," said Tim Christophersen, who coordinates work on forests and climate change at the UN.He told AFP that one volunteer could realistically plant about 100 trees a day. More than 23 million of Ethiopia's 105 million people took part, says Dr Teferra Mengistu, the National Forest Sector Development Program coordinator.

So if all these people planted 100 seedlings - the 350 million figure would be surpassed easily. However, there is no available tally for how many trees each person planted.

Planting 350 million trees, Mr Christophersen said, would require about 864,000 acres of land.

But we don't know much land was used during this 12-hour effort.

The head of one government-linked organisation told the BBC they'd been ordered to plant 10,000 trees, but had to pay for them out of their own budget.

So they planted 5,000, but reported the full amount.

Some government offices were shut down to allow civil servants to take part in the campaign

And there is also a discrepancy between figures for some areas given out by the Innovation and Technology minister and the numbers posted on the website of the prime minister.

We have asked the prime minister's office for clarification but have yet to get a response.

The UN has praised the Ethiopian government and called on the region to follow its lead.

"Other African nations should move with speed and challenge the status quo," said Juliette Biao Koudenoukpo, director of UN environment's Africa office.

However, the claim has also been viewed with scepticism by some.
"I personally don't believe that we planted this much… It might be impossible to plant this many trees within a day," said Mr Zelalem Worqagegnehu, a spokesman for the opposition Ezema party.

Some critics of the prime minister say he is using the campaign to distract from the challenges his government is facing, including ethnic conflicts which have forced some 2.5 million people from their homes.

Was it an official record?

Guinness World Records says it has not received an application from Ethiopia to verify the record-breaking attempt.

"We are always on the lookout for new record-breaking achievements however, and so we would encourage the organisers of this event to get in touch with us to register an application," said Jessica Dawes, a spokeswoman for the organisation.

Ethiopia would need to provide accurate evidence of the tree-planting, the people who took part, where it took place and timings. There also have to be two independent witnesses who can confirm the record results.

The current world record holder is India.

In 2016, 50 million trees were planted by more than 800,000 people in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

And if you're wondering about the record for the most trees planted in a day by one person, that's currently held by Canadian Ken Chaplin.

He planted 15,170 red pine seedlings in Saskatchewan, Canada in 2001.

Source: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49266983