

Crime

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Seattle grand jury indicts two Congolese men for allegedly smuggling poached ivory, rare white rhino horns

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Homeland Security agents arrested two men in Seattle while approximately \$3.5 million worth of ivory, rhino horn, and pangolin scales was seized in the Democratic... (Homeland Security Investigations) [More](#) ✓



By [Mike Carter](#) 

Seattle Times staff reporter

Two foreign nationals from the Democratic Republic of Congo were arrested outside Seattle last week and indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of conspiracy and money laundering for allegedly smuggling elephant ivory and rhino horns into the United States.

Herdade Lokua, 23, and his cousin, 31-year-old Jospin Mujangi, both of Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), are accused of working with a middle man — described in the 11-count indictment as an “unindicted co-conspirator” — to facilitate four shipments of the poached items into Seattle in August, September and May of last year, according to court documents.

Both men arrived in Washington on Nov. 2 to negotiate further shipments of prohibited animal parts and were arrested in Edmonds, according to officials from the Department of Homeland Security. They appeared Thursday in U.S. District Court, where they pleaded not guilty to charges, including conspiracy, money laundering, smuggling and violations of the Lacey Act, which prohibits submitting false records in interstate or foreign commerce.

The indictment alleges the shipments were in violation of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES), an international agreement among 183 nations, including the United States, aimed at protecting plants and animals threatened with extinction.

Both men were ordered held, pending further hearings. A trial date was set for Jan. 10.

Officials have said [Washington has been a hub for smuggling illegal animal parts](#) because, in part, of its location as a travel hub on the West Coast and its proximity to Asia, where the demand for these items is high.

In all, the indictment alleges the men facilitated the smuggling of four packages containing a total of 49 pounds of ivory from endangered African elephants and five pounds of horn from the African white rhinoceros, also listed as an endangered species. They were paid \$14,500 by an undercover Homeland Security agent for the ivory and an additional \$18,000 for the rhino horn, according to the indictment.

An additional \$3.5 million worth of ivory, rhino horns and pangolin scales were seized in the Congo, according to the Department of Homeland Security. The two men were allegedly in talks to smuggle pangolin scales into the United States, the indictment alleges.

According to the indictment, the ivory — which was intended for decorative carvings — was cut into rectangular pieces, painted black, and concealed in a shipment of ebony wood, with a manifest saying it was valued at \$60.

The indictment alleges Lokua offered to send larger shipments of ivory concealed in ocean-container shipments of bulk rubber. Lokua reportedly told the unindicted co-conspirator he also could send larger shipments of ivory, rhino horn and scales from pangolins, a nocturnal mammal also known as the scaly anteater.

The men were arrested when they arrived in Washington to negotiate the deal, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

David Yost, a spokesman for the Seattle office of DHS, said the rhino horn was intended for “medicinal purposes.” The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services reports that rhino horn is used in traditional Chinese medicine for a variety of purposes, including to lower fevers and reduce symptoms of gout.

The conspirators also discussed importing large quantities of pangolin scales. According to the indictment, pangolins are believed to be the most trafficked animal in the world, with their keratin scales used in traditional Chinese medicine. Their meat is considered a delicacy in some cultures.

The co-conspirator agreed to purchase roughly 55 pounds of pangolin scales, to be concealed in a shipment of wood chips, but the shipment was never made, according to the indictment. The charges allege there were discussions of smuggling as much as 1,100 pounds of pangolin scales into the United States in exchange for \$30,000 cash.

The charges allege the smuggling operation involved bribing African customs officials in Kinsasha, the capital of the DRC.

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