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Trial date set for Malaysia's first court case on trafficking of African Rhino horns

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TRIAL DATE SET FOR MALAYSIA'S FIRST COURT CASE ON TRAFFICKING OF AFRICAN RHINO HORNS

Two Malaysian men today claimed trial for illegal possession of African rhino horns in the country's first prosecution of such a crime, involving one of its biggest seizures of rhino horns to date.

The trial is set to begin this September, close to three years after the 50 pieces of horns were seized not far from the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.



The men sprung a surprise in court today when they opted for a trial. It was a reversal of the guilty plea they had recorded at an earlier court appearance last month. Media and conservation groups gathered at court on Wednesday (24 April) had expected a penalty to be given to the two men.

The highly anticipated trial is now scheduled to take place on 11, 12 and 25 September 2024

Mohamad Sukry Wahab and Muhammad Hafiszan Naser face two charges under the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010: one for possession of 49 White Rhino *Ceratotherium simum* horn pieces without a special permit, and a second charge for a single piece of horn from the Critically Endangered Black Rhino *Diceros bicornis*.

They face a maximum fine of MYR100,000 (USD 20,930) and up to three years in jail for each of the charges, if found guilty. The men were charged before the law was amended in 2022. The same offence now carries heavier fines.



Horns seized Sept 2021,
Image courtesy of Perhilitan

The seizure that led to this court case took place on the night of 9 September 2021 when the Department of Wildlife and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia stopped the vehicle driven by Sukry and Hafiszan, at a roundabout near Malaysia's main international airport and discovered the rhino horn pieces.

This turned out to be one of the largest rhino horn seizures Malaysia has seen and the only one where a case has been brought before the courts.

Like several other countries in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is no stranger to the trafficking of African rhino horns into Asia. There have been several significant confiscations in Malaysia's ports and airports in past years, but no arrests or prosecutions.

For instance, in 2018, another 50 rhino horn pieces were seized at a postal aviation centre in the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. More recently, in July 2022, 14 rhino horns were found in a shipment of multiple wildlife parts in transit at Port Kelang. There were no arrests in either incident.

According to a report released in 2022, between 575 and 923 African rhino horns entered illegal trade markets each year between 2018 and 2020.

Southeast Asia is a significant recipient and conduit of those horns, with TRAFFIC data showing at least 19 rhino horn trafficking incidences recorded in five countries in the region from January 2021 to December 2023.

About 420kgs of rhino horns have been confiscated in those incidents, including at least 84 whole horns. Viet Nam seized over half of this volume in 11 seizure incidents.

The case in Malaysia comes on the heels of similar cases in [Singapore](#) and Viet Nam, where courts issued prison sentences to the convicted persons.

In February this year, a Singapore court issued the maximum jail term of two years to a South African national convicted for illegally transporting 20 pieces of rhino horn into the country in October 2022. Meanwhile, in 2021, a court in Viet Nam issued a record 14-year jail sentence to a local man for trading and trafficking 55 pieces of rhino horns from the United Arab Emirates.

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