

Chinese men charged with rhino horn smuggling

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by Werner Menges



THREE Chinese men appeared in the Windhoek Magistrate's Court yesterday in connection with the discovery of 14 rhino horns in luggage at the Hosea Kutako International Airport on Monday.

The three men – Li Xiao Liang (30), Li Zhi Bing (53) and Pu Xu Nin (49) – are charged with counts of possession of controlled wildlife products and export of controlled wildlife products. They remain in police custody after their first court appearance before Magistrate Jermaine Muchali and have to return to court on 2 April.

The three men were arrested on Monday, after members of the Namibian Police's Aviation Unit at Hosea Kutako International Airport had allegedly discovered 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin in their luggage.

Police spokesperson Deputy Commissioner Edwin Kanguatjivi said on Monday that the men's passports indicated that they had left China on 9 March and arrived in Zambia the following day.

They stayed in Zambia for a day and then entered Namibia through the Wenela border post in the Zambezi Region on 12 March.

The men were arrested after a search of their luggage as they were about to board an aircraft going to the OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg. They were scheduled to travel on to Hong Kong from Johannesburg.

"This is a very serious case and it is enjoying the full attention of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism because these foreign nationals were found in illegal possession of products of animals which are protected in Namibia," Kanguatjivi said

After being informed of their rights to legal representation the three accused indicated to the magistrate that they would get the services of a private lawyer for themselves.

Speaking through a Mandarin interpreter, Pu told Magistrate Muchali that he is not connected to his co-accused and that he did not have "any stuff" with him before their arrest.

The magistrate told him that the case is still being investigated by the police and that he would have to remain in custody until their next court appearance at least.

The State is opposing the granting of bail to them because of the seriousness of the charges they are facing, the fact that the items involved in the case are valued at about N\$2 million at this stage, and the fear that the accused might abscond if released on bail, Public Prosecutor Verinao Kamahene said to the magistrate.

Rhino poaching has increased to alarming levels in several African countries over the past few years. South Africa's rhinoceros population has been especially hard hit. While 83 rhinos were poached in South Africa in 2008, that number had rocketed to 1 004 animals being illegally killed for their horns during 2013, according to the conservation organisation Save The Rhino International.

The sharp increase in poaching is attributed to a growing demand for rhino horn in Asian countries, mainly China and Vietnam, where the animals' horn is believed to have medicinal properties. In fact, though, rhino horns are composed largely of the protein keratin, which is also the chief component in hair, fingernails, and animal hooves.

Last month, a Chinese national was also arrested by police officers during a sting operation while in illegal possession of rhino horns at Opuwo in the Kunene Region. – (Own report/Nampa)