

Alleged rhino horn smuggler reports cell assault

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by Werner Menges



ONE of the Chinese men accused of trying to smuggle two suitcases containing rhino horns out of Namibia near the end of March told a magistrate yesterday that four of his front teeth were knocked out when he was assaulted by detainees in police custody.

Li Zhibing (53) told Magistrate George Mbundu during a bail hearing in the Windhoek Magistrate's Court in Katutura that other detainees in police detention attacked him and stole the clothes that he had with him in the police cells. During the attack, four of his front teeth were knocked out, Li said. He did not know the identity of the attackers, he added.

Li testified during the hearing of a bail application by him and his two co-accused, fellow Chinese citizens Li Xiaoliang (30) and Pu Xunin (49). The three men were arrested at Hosea Kutako International Airport east of Windhoek on 24 March, after 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin were discovered in two suitcases that allegedly formed part of the luggage with which they were set to fly out of Namibia.

The three men have been charged with counts of possession and export of controlled wildlife products. They have remained in police custody since their arrest.

Li told the magistrate that a Chinese friend of his, named as one Wu Zhang, had asked him to take two suitcases with him back to China. Wu, who is living in Zambia, told him that he would be paid US\$3 000 for delivering the two suitcases to someone in Shanghai, Li said.

He claimed he did not know what was in the two suitcases and also did not ask Wu what the suitcases contained. Li also claimed that the suitcases were locked when Wu delivered it to him at a hotel in Windhoek on the night before he and his two co-accused were supposed to fly out of Namibia, and that he did not have a key to unlock the two suitcases.

"I have never seen what was inside before, and that was the first time for me to see rhino horns," Li described the moments after police officers had forcefully opened the suitcases at the airport.

He confirmed that he was in possession of the two suitcases and that he had asked one of his co-accused, Li Xiaoliang, to help carry one of the suitcases at the airport and to check it in as part of his luggage.

"I honestly didn't know what was in the suitcases. I only tried to help a friend," Li said. He testified in Mandarin, with a Namibian who learned the language while living in China interpreting his testimony into English for the court.

Li also testified that he had travelled to Namibia on a holiday visa to explore the possibilities of doing business in the construction industry in the country. He and the two other accused travelled together and first spent two days in Zambia, where he stayed with his friend Wu, before they travelled on to Namibia, Li said.

He was heartbroken and afraid in custody, he said.

Li Xiaoliang told the magistrate last week that Li had given him a suitcase to carry because it was too heavy for him. He, too, claimed he did not know what was in the suitcase.

He further said he had first visited Namibia on a tourist visa in October last year, and made a second visit to the country as a tourist in March.

The bail hearing is continuing. Defence lawyer OJ Lino is representing the three accused, while Antony Wilson is appearing for the prosecution.