

## DNA links rhino horns to Namibia

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by Werner Menges



**DNA tests done in South Africa indicate that the rhino horns allegedly discovered in the luggage of three Chinese men at Hosea Kutako International Airport at the end of March were of Namibian origin.**

This was revealed by the national head of the police Protected Resources Unit, Detective Chief Inspector Barry de Klerk, during a bail hearing in the Windhoek Magistrate's Court in Katutura on Friday.

De Klerk told Magistrate George Mbundu that samples from the 14 rhino horns found in two suitcases at the airport were sent to South Africa for a DNA analysis to be carried out.

The DNA profiles of the samples were compared to DNA profiles on record in the Rhino DNA Index System (RhODIS) database, and the results showed that all of the horns came from Namibia, De Klerk testified.

The RhODIS database was developed by the University of Pretoria's Veterinary Generics Laboratory with the aim of keeping a record of the unique DNA profile of individual rhinos, which could then be used to prove the origin of rhino horns confiscated from suspected smugglers.

De Klerk said one of the horns found in the suitcases at the airport was micro-chipped; it came from a white rhino that had been imported into Namibia from South Africa some years ago. The three men applying to be granted bail – Chinese

nationals Li Xiaoliang (30), Li Zhibing (53), and Pu Xunin (49) – are suspected to be the foot soldiers being used by the faceless figures in control of an international wildlife poaching and smuggling syndicate, De Klerk said.

The three accused were arrested and charged with possessing and exporting controlled wildlife products after 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin were found in two suitcases that two of them – Li Zhibing and Li Xiaoliang – had checked in as part of their luggage on a flight on which they were supposed to leave Namibia on 24 March.

All three men have claimed during their bail hearing that they did not know what was in the suitcases. Li Zhibing told the magistrate last week that a Chinese citizen living in Zambia had asked him to take the suitcases to China. He said he was promised US\$3 000 as payment if he delivered the suitcases to someone in Shanghai.

He also told the court that he had asked Li Xiaoliang to book one of the suitcases in as part of his luggage. Pu Xunin denied having any involvement with or knowledge of the suitcases.

However, De Klerk testified that closed-circuit television recordings at the Windhoek Country Club Hotel, where the three men stayed the night before they were due to leave Namibia, showed that the two suitcases in which the rhino horns were later found were first taken to Pu's room, where he and an unknown man then spent about an hour with the pieces of luggage, before the suitcases were moved to the room of the two Lis.

De Klerk said that poachers, who have killed hundreds of rhinos in South Africa in recent years, could try to target Namibia's rhino population next. The country's courts should make it clear to would-be poachers and rhino horn smugglers that Namibia would not be a soft target for them, he said.

The bail hearing is scheduled to continue on Wednesday.