

No bail in rhino horn smuggling case

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by Werner Menges



THE three Chinese men charged with trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns out of Namibia at the end of March had their hopes of being released on bail dashed yesterday.

The three men's request to be granted bail was turned down by Magistrate George Mbundu in a ruling given in the Windhoek Magistrate's Court in Katutura.

The magistrate said he was not convinced that the three accused – Li Xiaoliang (30), Li Zhibing (53), and Pu Xunin (49) – would remain in Namibia and return to court to stand their trial if they were released on bail. He added that the interests of the public, who want to see justice done to accused persons, by far outweighed the interests that the accused had in being released on bail.

After dismissing the bail application of the three accused, Magistrate Mbundu postponed their case to 6 August, with further police investigations supposed to be carried out in the meantime. He also ordered that they should be moved from the holding cells of Windhoek Central Police Station, where they have been detained, to Windhoek Central Prison, after Public Prosecutor Anthony Wilson asked for such an order to be made.

Wilson noted that there are medical facilities available at Windhoek Central Prison. Li Xiaoliang and Li Zhibing have both told the magistrate during the bail hearing that other inmates have assaulted them in custody and stolen some of their belongings. Li Zhibing also said that four of his front teeth were knocked out when he was assaulted by other inmates.

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 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 man living in Zambia had asked him to take the suitcases with him 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 denied having any involvement with or knowledge of the suitcases. The head of the Namibian Police's Protected Resources Unit, Detective Chief Inspector Barry de Klerk, testified during the bail hearing that closed-circuit television footage at the hotel where the three men stayed in Windhoek the night before they tried to take a flight out of Namibia showed that the two suitcases in which the rhino horns were found had been kept in Pu's hotel room before they were moved to the room of the two Lis.

De Klerk also told the court that DNA tests done in South Africa have confirmed that the rhino horns found in the two suitcases were of Namibian origin.

In his ruling Magistrate Mbundu remarked that the joint travelling plans of the three accused – they flew together from Beijing on 9 March, spent two days in Zambia, then jointly entered Namibia through the Wenela border post in the Zambezi Region, and remained together during their stay in Namibia – left no doubt that they had acted in concert and with a common purpose.

Noting that the court had heard that someone else paid for the hotel accommodation of the three accused and for their flight tickets, he added that there was also no doubt that there were other people, too, involved in the offence.

The accused are being represented by defence lawyer OJ Lino.