



## Rhino horn smuggling syndicate targets Namibia

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The head of the Namibia Protective Resource Unit says there is evidence that the three Chinese men arrested for trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns out of the country are part of a much larger international syndicate. Detective Chief Inspector Barry de Klerk also testified last Friday during the bail hearing of the three accused that a Chinese investigator will arrive in Namibia within the next few weeks to assist with investigations. Li Xiaoliang, Li Zhibing and Pu Xuexin have been charged with being in possession of and exporting of controlled wildlife products. They were caught with 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin in their suitcases at the Hosea Kutako International Airport in March. They have maintained that they did not know what was in the suitcases. De Klerk said evidence indicates that three men were part of a well-orchestrated syndicate

operation that includes mules and supervisors. De Klerk said that they have acquired assistance from Interpol and have been in touch with the Chinese government to work hand-in-hand to identify those involved in this operation, as well as others. According to him they have evidence that places Pu Xuexin higher up in the syndicate than Li Xiaoliang and Li Zhibing, who are only mules. "Their co-operation in this syndicate comes from monetary gain and fear. They will never divulge who the real roleplayers in this syndicate are." De Klerk described the syndicate as faceless. "You will not see those high up in the hierarchy, and those low down will never give up their names." According to De Klerk there is video footage that they found from the night of March 23, shortly before the three men's arrest at the airport, while they were staying at the Windhoek Country Club. This footage shows Pu Xuexin and a fourth unknown person instructing the other two accused to collect suitcases from vehicles, before they carried them to a hotel room. The suitcases are identical to those in which the rhino horns were found at the airport. "These were the same suitcases that the accused were arrested with hours later at the airport, containing rhino horns." According to De Klerk the accused were fully aware of what was in the luggage. De Klerk said that after the three men were initially questioned after their arrest, he was not convinced about their story of how they came to be in possession of the rhino horns. After scrutinising their passports, he couldn't see the logic of why someone would apply for a 60-day Zambia visa and stay in that country for only one day, and then apply for a 32-day tourist visa to Namibia, while they could have applied for a transit visa if their ultimate destination was in fact the Land of the Brave. De Klerk also said that instead of flying from Beijing to Johannesburg to Windhoek, which costs about N\$25 000, they flew from China to Lusaka costing N\$36 000 and then made use of public transport to get to Namibia. "Why would one spend that much money? It is proof of a syndicate operating. They do not use the same entry point and exit point." De Klerk said it is the first time that such a large amount of horns were found at once and there is proof that they originate from Namibia. "It is the duty of the courts to ensure that Namibia is not seen as a soft spot for ruthless syndicates to come and destroy what we have in our country." The case has been postponed for final submissions on Wednesday.



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