

Rhino horn smuggling case postponed

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by Werner Menges



THE case in which three Chinese men are charged with trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns out of Namibia near the end of March has again been postponed for further investigations to be carried out.

The three accused men – Li Xiaoliang (30), Li Zhibing (53), and Pu Xunin (49) – have to appear in court again on 11 September, after Magistrate George Mbundu postponed their case in the Hosea Kutako International Airport Magistrate's Court on Wednesday.

Their case has also been transferred from the periodical airport court to the Windhoek Magistrate's Court in Katutura, where the three accused should make their next appearance before a magistrate.

Public prosecutor Anthony Wilson, who asked for the postponement, informed Magistrate Mbundu that the investigation of the case is continuing and that the police might still arrest additional suspects.

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 at Hosea Kutako International Airport as part of their luggage for a flight on which they were supposed to leave Namibia on 24 March.

All three of the men have claimed during a bail hearing in May that they did not know what the suitcases contained.

Li Zhibing claimed that a Chinese citizen 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 had any involvement with or knowledge of the suitcases.

Magistrate Mbundu, who presided over the bail hearing, also heard testimony that DNA tests done in South Africa have confirmed that the rhino horns found in the two suitcases were of Namibian origin.

The three accused remain in custody, after Magistrate Mbundu turned down their request to be granted bail.

They are now being represented by defence lawyer Orben Sibeya.