

Rhino horn case sent to Regional Court

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THE three Chinese men accused of trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns out of Namibia in March this year will have to stand trial on three main charges in the Windhoek Regional Court, the prosecutor general has decided.

The three men – Li Xiaoliang (30), Li Zhibing (53), and Pu Xuexin (49) – will have to make a first appearance in the Windhoek Regional Court on 17 February.

They were informed during their latest appearance in the Windhoek Magistrate's Court in Katutura yesterday that the prosecutor general has decided that they should stand trial in the Windhoek Regional Court on two main charges of unlawful export of controlled wildlife products, involving 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin. They are also set to face a third main charge of the acquisition, use, possession or taking out of Namibia of property that forms part of the proceeds of unlawful activities, which is an offence in terms of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act.

In alternative charges under the main charges of unlawful export of controlled wildlife products, the three accused will also face counts of unlawfully exporting or dealing in controlled wildlife products.

The three men denied guilt on charges of possession of 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin, export of controlled wildlife products, and acquisition, use or possession of property that forms part of the proceeds of unlawful activities during a previous court appearance on 13 November.

They were arrested at Hosea Kutako International Airport on 24 March, 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 with which they were planning to leave Namibia.

The three men claimed during a bail hearing in May that they did not know what the suitcases in their possession contained.

Li Zhibing told a magistrate during their bail hearing 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 denied having any involvement with or knowledge of the suitcases.

A senior police officer testified during the bail hearing that DNA tests done in South Africa confirmed that the rhino horns found in the two suitcases were of Namibian origin.

The three men's passports indicate that they travelled together from Beijing to Lusaka in Zambia two weeks before their arrest and entered Namibia at a border post in the Zambezi region on 12 March.

They have remained in custody since their arrest. Their request to be released on bail was refused on 22 May.