

Chinese man admits smuggling rhino horns

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by Werner Menges



ONE of the Chinese men accused of trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns out of Namibia in March last year admitted yesterday that he knew he was carrying controlled wildlife products in two suitcases which he was planning to take to

China.

The admission by Li Zhibing that he was aware of the contents of the suitcases in which police officers discovered 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin at Hosea Kutako International Airport on 24 March last year is contained in a plea explanation that was handed to Magistrate Alexis Diergaardt at the start of the trial of Li and three fellow Chinese citizens.

With his co-accused denying guilt on all charges, Li told the magistrate through a Mandarin interpreter that he wanted to plead guilty to two counts of unlawful export of controlled wildlife products. State advocate Simba Nduna, who is conducting the prosecution of the four accused men, did not accept the plea offered by Li, though, with the result that Li and his co-accused will have to see through their trial together.

Li (54), Li Xiaoliang (31), Pu Xuenin (49), and Wang Hui (40) are charged with two main counts of unlawful export of controlled wildlife products, alternatively unlawful dealing in or possession of controlled wildlife products, and a third main charge of acquiring the proceeds of unlawful activities, alternatively possessing or bringing into or taking out of Namibia the proceeds of unlawful activities.

In his plea explanation, Li said a childhood friend of his, one Wu Zhong, had asked him to transport two suitcases from Namibia to China, where he was supposed to deliver the items to a brother of Wu. Li said he was visiting Namibia as a tourist and to investigate business opportunities in the construction sector when Wu made the request to him.

He stated that he received the suitcases, which were locked, from Wu at Windhoek Country Club Resort and Casino. He also said he asked Wu what the contents of the suitcases were, and was then informed that there were rhino horns and a leopard skin inside. Wu promised him that he would be paid US\$3 000 if he delivered the suitcases to Wu's brother in China, and he agreed to do as asked, Li stated.

Li's admission that he knew there were rhino horns and a leopard skin in the suitcases is a U-turn from his previous version, during a bail hearing in May last year, that he did not know and had not been told what the two pieces of luggage contained.

Li also said in his plea explanation that Li Xiaoliang and Pu, who were arrested at the same time as he was, did not know that the suitcases contained controlled wildlife products. Once he, Li and Pu had arrived at Hosea Kutako International Airport, he asked Li (Xiaoliang) to take one of the suitcases as part of his luggage so that he would not exceed the weight of the luggage he was allowed to take on to the aircraft with which they were due to leave Namibia, Li further said.

The two Lis and Pu were stopped by airport security staff after a police officer at a luggage scanner noticed suspicious objects in the two suitcases, the magistrate heard yesterday.

Wang was arrested in May this year and was joined to the case of the first three accused in June. He was living at Otjiwarongo, where he was running a business, before his arrest.

Defence lawyer Orben Sibeya is representing the four accused.