



Chinese man pleads guilty in rhino horn case

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One of the Chinese men arrested for trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns worth more than N\$2 million out of Namibia has taken full culpability for the crime, saying his three co-accused knew nothing about it. The trial started yesterday at the Regional Court in Katutura. Li Zhibing pleaded guilty to the unlawful export or attempt to export rhino horns and a leopard skin. On another charge of unlawfully dealing in controlled wildlife products, unlawful possession of controlled wildlife products and money laundering he and his co-accused, Li Xiaoliang, Pu Xuexin and Wang Hui, pleaded not guilty. Xiaoliang, Zhibing and Xuexin were caught at Hosea Kutako International Airport on March 24 last year with 14 rhino horns, worth more than N\$2.3 million, as well as a leopard skin worth about N\$50 000, in their luggage. Hui was arrested later and was labelled the kingpin of

the operation. In Zhibing's plea statement read in court yesterday he said he came to Namibia on May 12, 2014 as a tourist and to explore business opportunities in the construction industry. He was to return on March 24. According to him, on March 23 at the parking area of the Windhoek Country Club Resort and Casino he received two suitcases from his childhood friend Wu Zhong, who is based in Zambia. "I know Wu Zhong from childhood and we are from the same town and neighbourhood in Jiansu, China." Zhibing said the suitcases were locked and Zhong requested him to take the suitcases to China because he was purportedly too busy in Zambia to travel. Zhong allegedly told Zhibing that the suitcases contained rhino horns, a leopard skin and clothes, and that he would pay Zhibing US\$3 000 to deliver them in China. "Tempted by the money which I was going to receive after delivering the suitcases in China, I accepted to take the two bags to China." According to Zhibing after agreeing to take the suitcases he called Xiaoliang to help carry the suitcases because they were very heavy. He said he did not tell any of the other accused about his conversation with Zhong or what was in the suitcases. According to him at no stage before the suitcases were opened by the police at the airport did any of the other accused have any knowledge of the contents because the two suitcases remained locked. Zhibing further said that on March 24 they went to the airport where he again asked Xiaonliang to help carry the suitcases. One of the suitcases was checked in under Xiaonliang's name due to weight restrictions. "I know that by attempting to export the rhino horns and a leopard skin out of Namibia I committed an unlawful act. I admit that my actions were unlawful and that I had the necessary intention to export the rhino horn and a leopard skin to China despite not knowing where Wu Zhong had obtained the rhino horns and the leopard skin," his plea explanation read. Warrant Officer Willemina Shetunyenga, who works at Hosea Kutako International Airport, gave an account of the day when the suitcases were found. She said when the bags were screened she went to search for the owners in the departure hall. She asked Xuexin whether he knew the names on the luggage tags and he identified Xiaoliang and Zhibing, who were then asked to follow her to the baggage area. After they pointed out their luggage they were asked whether they knew what was in the luggage. Xiaoliang said he knew while Zhibing said yes and no. Shetunyenga said during questioning the two men were asked to open the bags, but they kept telling her "the keys are with boss." Eventually they told her that the "boss is in the parking area". They were escorted to the parking area but there was no one there. At that stage Shetunyenga remembered about the third Chinese national who had been sitting with them and thought they could be referring to him. The witness will continue testifying today. WINDHOEK ELLANIE SMIT



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