

Rhino contraband trial continues next month

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THE four Chinese men accused of having tried to smuggle a hoard of rhino horns out of Namibia in March last year is due to continue in the Windhoek Regional Court in September.

Having started on Wednesday last week, the trial was postponed after the testimony of the prosecution's second witness was completed on Friday.

The four accused men – Li Zhibing (54), Li Xiaoliang (31), Pu Xuexin (49) and Wang Hui (40) – are due to return to the dock on 14 September for the continuation of their trial before magistrate Alexis Diergaardt.

The trial began last week with Li Zhibing offering a guilty plea on two main counts of unlawful export of controlled wildlife products, consisting of 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin, on which his three co-accused denied guilt. All four of the men also pleaded not guilty to 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.

With state advocate Simba Nduna telling the magistrate that the prosecution was accepting the factual basis of part of Li's plea, but not the entire plea, the court embarked on a full trial of the four accused men.

The prosecution is alleging that the four men tried to smuggle 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin out of Namibia on 24 March last year, when Li Zhibing, Li Xiaoliang and Pu were due to leave the country on a flight from Hosea Kutako International Airport to Johannesburg. Their travelling plans were thrown off course when the three men were arrested at the airport after police officers discovered 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin in two suitcases that were part of their luggage.

Wang, who is alleged to have participated in the attempt to smuggle the wildlife contraband out of Namibia, was arrested in May this year and later added to his three compatriots' case as the fourth accused.

The prosecution's second witness in the trial, police warrant officer Wilhelmina Shetunyenga, told the court on Friday that Li Zhibing and Li Xiaoliang were questioned about their luggage after suspicious objects were detected in two suitcases that had been booked on to the flight that they and Pu were due to take from the airport. She said she and Li Xiaoliang managed to communicate in English, and that he told her he knew what the suitcase booked in under his name contained. That is being denied by Li, defence lawyer Orben Sibeya, who is representing the four accused, told Shetunyenga, who nevertheless stuck to her version.

Shetunyenga also testified that when Li was asked for the keys needed to unlock the two suitcases, he said these were with "the boss" at the parking area of the airport. After she had sent a colleague out to the parking area with Li to look for the person with the keys, her colleague returned with a report that they could not find the person, Shetunyenga said. Li is also disputing that part of her testimony, Sibeya told the witness.

Pu was found in a toilet at the airport after his two compatriots had been taken aside for questioning, Shetunyenga also told the magistrate.

In the plea explanation that Li Zhibing gave to the court, he admitted that he tried to export 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin out of Namibia on 24 March last year.

He stated that he had arrived in Namibia on 12 March as a tourist and to explore business opportunities in construction. On 23 March, a friend of his who was based in Zambia, one Wu Zhong, gave him two suitcases at the Windhoek Country Club Resort and Casino after Wu had asked him to take the suitcases to China, Li said.

He stated that he had asked Wu about the contents of the suitcases, and that Wu had told him they contained clothes, rhino horns and a leopard skin. Wu did not tell him where he had got hold of the wildlife products, Li added.

He further stated that Wu promised to pay him US\$3 000 if he delivered the suitcases to Wu's brother in China.

Li said although he asked Li Xiaoliang to book one of the suitcases in for their flight as part of the latter Li's luggage, neither he nor Pu knew what the pieces of luggage contained.

The four accused are being kept in custody.