



'Poaching smells like an inside job'

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The head of the Namibian Police, Inspector-General Sebastian Ndeitunga, said he would dismiss with contempt any claim that the government does not have a real commitment to root out the poaching of Namibia's wildlife. "Cabinet has allocated a lot of resources to combat and eradicate poaching. It is a costly exercise. This is an indication of how serious government is," he stressed. Ndeitunga said it is clear that the poaching of rhinos and elephants in Namibian national parks is a well-orchestrated and well-funded transnational organised crime. For this reason he has rallied regional governments to work in close cooperation in the fight against poaching. He also went further afield when he made an urgent appeal to Asian regional police chiefs to work with their African counterparts at an Interpol conference in Singapore in April. "All indications are that the



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market for the rhino horns and elephant tusks is in Asia. That is why I asked the police chiefs in Asia to provide us with DNA samples when seizures are made so that we can determine the origin of the wildlife products. If criminals are organised, we as police must cooperate. That was my message," he said. So far, though, no cooperation from his Asian counterparts has been forthcoming. Ndeitunga said because he had discussed the issue of poaching with the Secretary-General of Interpol, Jürgen Stock, the matter was placed on the agenda of the 84th General Assembly of Interpol that took place in Rwanda in November. "It was very well discussed in that meeting and resolutions were taken at the General Assembly. So our government, truly speaking, is doing what is necessary to be done," Ndeitunga said. What the operations on poaching have found, is that foreign links are using locals to do the poaching. Ndeitunga said the poaching ring is very sophisticated and they even use drones in the Etosha National Park to map out the area and to establish exactly where the animals are. "It also smells of an inside job. That is what I think," he said. Former police commissioner Ndahangwapo Kashihakumwa who was the first gold commander of the anti-poaching operation in the Etosha National Park said no kingpins were identified during his tenure there. He said while he was there, his team of investigators did, however establish that four main syndicates were operating in and around the Etosha area. Kashihakumwa said the "most effective and most dangerous" syndicates armed with assault rifles are operating from Onamatanga, Utsathima, litapa and Otjenova. One of the arrested suspects had taken the investigating team to where he hid his rifle underground. This rifle was fitted with a silencer and telescope. "They had quite sophisticated weapons," said Kashihakumwa. "The groups seem to be well-organised. They work with military precision and are well-coordinated. Their operations are also well-concealed. If it was not for that, they would have been detected a long time ago." Kashihakumwa said he suspected that the poachers were coached by "well-trained people whether from within the Ministry of Environment and Tourism or from other uniformed organisations such as private security companies". "They were well-exposed to security related issues because they were very careful. Based on our investigations, these are people we expected to have linkages with staff at the MET," he said. The majority of the suspects caught during Kashihakumwa's tenure at Etosha were between the ages of 19 and 32 years, some employed and some unemployed. One of those arrested was a deputy director in the Ministry of Works and Transport in the Erongo region. Another was a police officer based in Windhoek and yet another was a teacher in the Omusati Region. One former MET staff member was also arrested. Kashihakumwa said when his team started its operations at the start of June it found that security at Etosha was not as tight as it should have been for such a public asset. He said some years ago the anti-poaching unit was even dismantled when senior staff at the park, not on instruction of the ministry, redeployed members of the unit elsewhere. "That is what weakened the safety and security of the animals. If the anti-poaching unit was effective and there was no inside job, I'm telling you we would not have lost so many rhino," Kashihakumwa said. He said during his three months at Etosha - between June and August - no incidents of poaching occurred and it took only 14 days into the job before he and his team made their first arrests. Catherine Sasman