

Rhino horn trial moves on to defence case

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Wang Hui



Li Zhibing

by Werner Menges



THE trial of four Chinese citizens accused of having tried to smuggle two suitcases containing rhino horns out of Namibia in March last year is scheduled to continue in the Windhoek Regional Court next month.

Evidence in defence of the four accused men is expected to be heard when the trial resumes before magistrate Alexis Diergaardt from 27 January. The prosecution, represented by Simba Nduna, closed its case against the four accused last week.

Wang Hui (40), Pu Xuexin (50), Li Zhibing (54) and Li Xiaoliang (31) are charged with two counts of unlawful export of controlled wildlife products, alternatively unlawful dealing in or possession of controlled wildlife products, and a count of unlawfully acquiring, possessing, using or taking out of Namibia the proceeds of unlawful activities, alternatively money laundering.

Wang, Pu and Li Xiaoliang pleaded not guilty to the charges when their trial began in July. Li Zhibing, though, admitted that he attempted to export 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin from Namibia through Hosea Kutako International Airport on 24 March last year.

He claimed in a plea explanation that a childhood friend had asked him to transport two suitcases from Namibia to China, where he was supposed to deliver the pieces of luggage to a brother of his friend.

According to Li, he received the suitcases, which were locked, from his friend at Windhoek Country Club Resort and Casino. He also stated that his friend had told him there were rhino horns and a leopard skin in the suitcases. His friend promised

him that he would be paid US\$3 000 if he delivered the suitcases to the friend's brother in China, and he agreed to do as asked, Li said. Li further said in his plea explanation that Li Xiaoliang and Pu did not know that the suitcases contained controlled wildlife products.

The two Lis and Pu were all arrested on 24 March last year, after airport security staff had discovered the rhino horns and leopard skin in the luggage that had been booked on to a flight in the names of the two Lis.

Wang was arrested at the Windhoek Country Club Resort and Casino on 18 May this year, the commanding officer of the police's Protected Resources Unit, chief inspector Barry de Klerk, has told the court. He has also testified that passport photographs of Pu and a driving licence with a photo of Pu were found in Wang's room in the hotel.

Photographs of the passports of the two Lis and Pu were also found stored in the memory of Wang's cellphone, De Klerk said.

Wang's explanation was that he had received the photographs from a friend, De Klerk also said.

He told the magistrate that in his opinion closed-circuit security camera recordings obtained from the hotel where the four men stayed during the night of 23 to 24 March 2014, showed that the two Lis were working for and under the control of Wang and Pu - something that defence lawyer Orben Sibeya has disputed.

The four accused are being kept in custody.