State shows hierarchy in rhino case

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The State yesterday painted a picture of the pecking order among the four Chinese men accused of trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns out of Namibia. Li Xiaoliang, Li Zhibing, Pu Xuexin and Wang Hui yesterday appeared in the Windhoek Regional Court in Katutura for the continuation of their trial. They are charged with trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns worth more than N$2.3 million and a leopard skin valued at N$50 000 out of Namibia. The items were found in two suitcases at Hosea Kutako International Airport on March 24 last year. State prosecutor Simba Nduna yesterday continued with his cross-examination of Li Xiaoliang and made reference to the hierarchy within the group. He argued that Li Xiaoliang and Li Zhibing were the subordinates, receiving instructions from Pu and Hui. This he pointed out several times when he referred to the fact that the two were instructed by Hui and Pu to collect luggage from Hui's vehicle in the parking area of the Windhoek Country Club and Resort where they stayed on March 23, 2014. The same bags were later found to contain the rhino horns and leopard skin. Nduna also pointed out that while Pu and Hui moved around freely, Li Xiaoliang and Li Zhibing were mostly confined to their hotel rooms, except when given a task by one of the other two. Li Xiaoliang told the court that he received both bags in the parking area of the Windhoek Country Club. He said in the first incident, Li Zhibing received a phone call and was asked to collect a bag from a Chinese friend of his in the parking lot. Before he left, he was also asked to collect another bag from Hui's vehicle. He said he went to Hui's vehicle where he removed a shoulder bag from the back seat and returned to his hotel room. Nduna noted that from the video footage this took about five minutes but queried this testimony, wanting to know why Li Xiaoliang did not take the bag belonging to Hui to Hui's room. Li Xiaoliang said the time that he took to collect the two bags could not have been more than 20 minutes and that he did not know where Hui was at that stage. Nduna noted that from the video footage, Hui and Pu can be seen leaving the hotel and that they were gone for about an hour and 20 minutes. Upon their return, Pu went to Li Xiaoliang's room. Li Xiaoliang told the court that Li Zhibing had again received a call to collect a bag from the parking area from his Chinese friend. The bag was apparently very heavy and he was asked to help carry it. He said as they were about to leave, Pu came in and asked them to collect another empty bag from Hui's vehicle. In the parking lot Li Zhibing collected the heavy bag from his friend and he went to collect the empty bag from Hui's vehicle. However, because the blue bag was so heavy they switched bags. This took about four minutes, according to the video footage. These two bags were later taken to the room of Hui and Pu where they were kept for more than 30 minutes. Nduna questioned why the bag that belonged to Li Zhibing's friend was taken to another room and Li Xiaoliang said, "I had done my job. I do not know why Li Zhibing did not take his friend's bag back to the room." Nduna argued that the bag was left in Hui's room because it contained contraband, that they knew it and that they were acting on instructions. Shortly afterwards Pu entered Li Xiaoliang's room and removed the first bag from the room. "Why would he take this bag that did not belong to him?" Nduna asked. Afterwards Pu returned both bags because they did not belong to him and Hui. On the video footage, the two bags appear much heavier than earlier. Leaving the hotel for the airport the following morning, Hui was seen pulling the blue bag, but left it in the hallway where Li Zhibing took possession of it. Li Xiaoliang was seen pulling the brown bag. The case was postponed to March 3. ELLANIE SMIT