



## Rhino horn smuggling verdict next month

24 May 2016 | Crime

The judgement which has been described as Namibia's biggest rhino horn smuggling case to date, will finally be delivered next month.

Four Chinese nationals stand accused of trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns worth more than N\$2 million out of Namibia.

The case has been postponed until 22 June for judgement.

Magistrate Alexis Diergaardt postponed the hearing last week, after hearing closing arguments in the Windhoek Regional Court in Katutura.

Li Zhibing, Li Xiaoliang and Pu Xuexin were arrested at the Hosea Kutako International Airport on 24 March 2014, allegedly with the 14 rhino horns worth more than N\$2.3 million and a leopard skin valued at N\$50 000 in their luggage.

The fourth accused, Wang Hui, was arrested later in the same year.

He has been labelled as the kingpin of the operation.

They have all been charged with the unlawful export of rhino horns, under the Controlled Wildlife Products Act.

Alternatively, they are charged with the unlawful dealing in rhino horns or the unlawful possession of rhino horns.

The second count they are charged with is the unlawful export of the leopard skin, alternatively the unlawful possession thereof.

They are also charged with contravening the Prevention of Organised Crime Act.

Li Zhibing pleaded guilty to the unlawful export or attempt to export rhino horns and a leopard skin.

He and his co-accused have pleaded not guilty unlawfully dealing in controlled wildlife products, the unlawful possession of controlled wildlife products and money laundering

In Zhibing's plea statement, he said he came to Namibia on 12 May 2014 as a tourist, to explore business opportunities in the construction industry.

He was to return to China on 24 March 2014.

According to him, on 23 March, in 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.

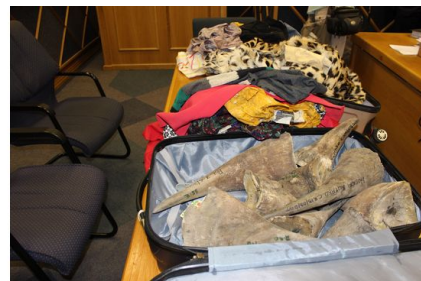
"I know Wu Zhong from childhood and we are from the same town and neighbourhood in Jiansu, China."

Zhibing said the suitcases were locked and Zhong requested him to take them to China, because he was allegedly too busy in Zambia to travel.

Zhong allegedly told Li 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," the accused said.

The State has maintained that there is a hierarchy within the group, with Wang and Pu calling the shots, and Li Zhibing being used as a scapegoat.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/assets/horn-smuggling-verdict-next-month2016-05-240.jpg>)

VALUABLE: The rhino horns and leopard skin that were nearly smuggled out of the country.

PHOTO: ELLANIE SMIT

ELLANIE SMIT