

Verdict awaited in rhino horn smuggling trial

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Page no: 3



Wang Hui



Li Zhibing

by Werner Menges



FOUR Chinese citizens accused of having attempted to smuggle two suitcases filled with rhino horns and a leopard skin out of Namibia in March 2014, are due to hear the verdict in their trial next month.

Magistrate Alexis Diergaardt postponed the delivery of the judgement in the four accused men's trial to 22 June after hearing closing arguments in the matter in the Windhoek Regional Court on Friday.

Wang Hui (41), Pu Xuexin (50), Li Zhibing (54) and Li Xiaoliang (32) are charged with two counts of the 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.

While Pu, Wang and Li Xiaoliang denied guilt on all of the charges at the start of their trial in July last year, Li Zhibing admitted that he attempted to export 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin from Namibia through the Hosea Kutako International Airport on 24 March 2014.

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. He also stated that his friend had told him there were rhino horns and a leopard skin in the suitcases, and that he was promised he would be paid US\$3 000 if he delivered the suitcases to the friend's brother in China.

The two Lis and Pu were all arrested on 24 March 2014 after airport security staff had discovered the rhino horns and leopard skin in the luggage which had been booked onto a flight in the names of the two Lis.

Wang, who had a shop at Otjiwarongo, was arrested at a casino of a Windhoek hotel in May last year.

State advocate Simba Nduna argued on Friday that by offering to plead guilty to the charges, Li Zhibing had tried to offer himself as a sacrificial lamb in a bid to get his three co-accused off the hook. Li was lying through his teeth in his plea explanation, Nduna charged.

He argued that the evidence before the court showed the four accused men were part of an organised criminal unit, and that they had been involved in a well-thought-out criminal scheme.

Closed-circuit surveillance camera recordings showing the close contact and interaction of the four accused with each other at the Windhoek hotel where they spent the night before the two Lis and Pu were arrested at the airport, and also showing how the two suitcases in which the rhino horns and leopard skin were later discovered were moved between the two hotel rooms occupied by the four, is part of the evidence before the court.

Nduna argued that the evidence showed the four were all party to the offences they are charged with.

Defence lawyer Orben Sibeya had a contrary view, though. He argued that there was no clear and convincing evidence to show there was a hierarchy among the four, with Wang in a top position, as had been suggested by the prosecution.

Sibeya also argued there was no evidence to suggest the younger Li, Pu and Wang had been aware of the contents of the two suitcases. He argued the prosecution had failed – ‘dismally, in our view,’ he said – to prove the guilt of the younger Li, Pu and Wang on the charges.

With regard to Li Zhibing, Sibeya said he should be found guilty of attempting to export rhino horns and a leopard skin from Namibia, but should be acquitted on the money laundering charge, as that is a duplication of the other two charges. The four accused remain in custody.