

Rhino horns foursome kept waiting for verdict

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Page no: 1



Wang Hui



Li Zhibing

by Werner Menges



THE delivery of the verdict in the trial of four Chinese citizens charged with having tried to smuggle a hoard of rhino horns out of Namibia in March 2014, has again been postponed by a month.

The judgement in their trial is now due to be handed down on 13 September, the four accused men were told when they appeared in the Windhoek Regional Court yesterday for what had been expected to be the delivery of the verdict.

The reason for yesterday's postponement of the judgement was that magistrate Alexis Diergaardt, who has been presiding over the men's trial, was ill.

The four men – Wang Hui (41), Pu Xuexin (50), Li Zhibing (55) 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.

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 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. Li added that he was promised a payment of 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 security staff at Hosea Kutako International Airport had discovered the 14 rhino horns and leopard skin in the luggage that had been booked on to a flight in the names of the two Lis. Wang, who had a shop at Otjiwarongo, was arrested at a Windhoek hotel in May last year.

In his closing address on the verdict that is to be delivered in the trial, State advocate Simba Nduna argued in May this year that the evidence before the court showed the four accused men were part of an organised criminal unit and that they were all party to the offences they are being charged with.

Nduna asked the magistrate to convict all four of the accused on all of the three charges.

The evidence before the court includes closed-circuit surveillance camera recordings showing the four accused closely interacting with each other at the Windhoek hotel where they spent the night before the two Lis and Pu were arrested at the airport.

The CCTV recordings also show 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 accused.

Defence lawyer Orben Sibeya argued there was no evidence to suggest the younger Li, Pu and Wang had been aware of the contents of the two suitcases. The prosecution failed to prove that they were guilty of the charges, he also argued.

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 was a duplication of the other two charges.

The four accused remain in custody.