

## Chinese men guilty over rhino horns in luggage

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by Werner Menges



**THE discovery of a hoard of rhino horns and a leopard skin in two suitcases at Hosea Kutako International Airport in March 2014 led to the conviction of four Chinese citizens on two criminal charges in the Windhoek Regional Court on Friday.**

Magistrate Alexis Diergaardt convicted each of the four Chinese nationals on two counts of attempting to export controlled wildlife products after she found that it had been proven that they acted in common purpose when an attempt was made to take two suitcases containing 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin out of Namibia on 24 March 2014.

She also found that the four – Wang Hui (41), Pu Xuexin (51), Li Zhibing (55) and Li Xiaoliang (32) – jointly planned the offences of which they were convicted.

Pu and the two Lis were arrested at Hosea Kutako International Airport, where they were set to board a flight out of Namibia, on 24 March 2014, after the contents of two suitcases that had been booked on to the flight under the names of the two Lis were detected by police officers.

Wang was arrested and added as an accused to the case of his three compatriots in May last year. The four accused were 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.

In her verdict, the magistrate dealt in brief with the third count, which is a charge in terms of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act, finding that the prosecution did not prove the guilt of the four on that charge.

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

He claimed in a plea explanation that a childhood friend had asked him to take 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.

Following his plea offer, which was not accepted by the state, Li Zhibing did not testify in his own defence during the trial. His three co-accused testified in their own defence, but in her judgement, magistrate Diergaardt rejected the versions of Pu and Li Xiaoliang that they visited Namibia only as tourists and to acquaint themselves with the construction business in the country.

She also rejected their and Wang's denials of having been aware of the contents of the two suitcases.

She found that Wang, who told the court he was a businessman with permanent residence in Namibia, acted as a caretaker for his three co-accused when they made preparations to try to take the two suitcases containing wildlife contraband out of the country.

The magistrate noted that the evidence before her showed Wang and Pu knew each other well. Wang booked the hotel rooms where the four accused stayed in Windhoek on the night before the two Lis and Pu tried to board the flight out of Namibia. Wang also paid for their flight tickets.

She further noted that a Mandarin interpreter who was present when the two Lis and Pu were first questioned by the police testified that she heard Li Zhibing telling his companions that he would "take the weight" on himself – interpreted as an indication that he would bear the guilt alone – and the two Lis at that stage referred to Pu as their employer.

The prosecution also presented evidence that Pu and Li Xiaoliang visited Namibia in November 2013 as well, the magistrate recounted.

Following the delivery of the verdict, the start of the pre-sentencing phase of the trial was postponed to Friday this week.

The four men, who are represented by defence lawyer Orben Sibeya, remain in custody. State advocate Simba Nduna is prosecuting.