



## State wants 6 years for Chinese smugglers

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The State has asked that the four Chinese men found guilty of trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin from Namibia should be sentenced to six years in prison.

The State and defence yesterday made their submissions on sentencing in the trail of Li Xiaoliang, Li Zhibing, Pu Xuexin and Wang Hui.

Li Xiaoliang, Li Zhibing and Pu Xuexin were caught with the rhino horns and leopard skin in their luggage at Hosea Kutako International Airport on 23 March 2014. Wang Hui, who was believed to be the kingpin of the smuggling operation, was arrested in May at the Windhoek Country Club and Resort.

The State yesterday provided evidence that linked three of the 14 rhino horns to Namibia. Two were from a black rhino shot by poachers in 2014 and the other horn was from a white rhino that was shot by a trophy hunter and stolen at a taxidermist.

The evidence was submitted after a dispute had arisen over the origin of the horns last week.

The head of the Namibian Police's Protected Resources Unit (PRU), Deputy Commissioner Barry De Klerk, yesterday testified that the 14 rhino horns were scanned with a microchip scanner in his presence upon confiscation in 2014.

DNA samples were also collected from the horns and sent through the Ministry of Environment and Tourism to a laboratory in South Africa for assessment. It was determined through additional scanning that one of the horns was microchipped and was from a white rhino that had been imported from South Africa by the owner of Snyrivier farm near Okahandja.

Upon further investigation it was determined that the animal was later hunted and the horns were given to a taxidermist in Brakwater to be turned into a trophy.

De Klerk said the horns were stolen between September and November 2013 and never recovered.

The owner reported the theft to the environment ministry but did not want to open a criminal case because he believed the horns would turn up.

"The owner of the taxidermist only opened a case in November 2015 and neglected to report the case to the police," De Klerk testified.

De Klerk stressed that this was negligence on the part of the taxidermist and not the hunter, but no charges were made against the taxidermist. According to him investigations are continuing to establish how the horns went missing.

In June 2014 an old rhino carcass was discovered in the Uukwaluudhi area and DNA samples were sent to South Africa for analysis.

De Klerk said the tests confirmed that the samples taken from two of the 14 rhino horns confiscated from the Chinese matched those taken from the carcass found in Uukwaluudhi.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/assets-wants-6-years-for-chinese-smugglers2016-09-300.jpg>)

AT COURT: The four convicted smugglers - Li Xiaoliang, Li Zhibing, Pu Xuexin and Wang Hui.  
Photo: ELLANIE SMIT

"Three horns were linked to Namibia, one from the white rhino imported from South Africa and two horns from a black rhino poached at Uukwaluudhi."

A senior conservation scientist at the environment ministry, Pietie Beytel, testified about the three different subspecies of black rhino found. He explained that Namibia is home to 95% of the black rhino subspecies known as *Diceros bicornis bicornis*. The only other place these rhinos are found is in the Northern Cape province of South Africa and that is because they were bought at auction in Namibia.

Beytel said DNA analysis of the horns showed that 13 of the 14 rhino horns in this case belonged to the Namibian black rhino subspecies. The 14th was the white rhino horn that was imported into Namibia.

The defence submitted that the convicted men's personal circumstances such as health and financial means should be taken into account.

Defence lawyer Orben Sibeya also submitted that the men had spent a long time in custody already and said that imprisonment would not be an appropriate sentence. For this kind of crime a maximum fine of N\$200 000 or 20 years' imprisonment can be imposed.

Sibeya indicated that each of his clients could pay a N\$50 000 fine.

State prosecutor Simba Nduna said imprisonment was the only way to go.

"Of course they say they are sorry for what they did and that they will not repeat it. But what is striking is that they have not taken the court into their confidence, but only made submissions through their lawyer.

"We have only seen the tip of the iceberg. They have not revealed any of the inner workings of their network. Have they therefore shown any remorse?"

He further submitted that any sentence other than imprisonment would encourage more smugglers to come to Namibia.

"Money is not a problem for those involved in these illicit activities. The message we send to the international community will be that if you get caught you pay. This is not a message we want to send to the dark underworld."

He recommended a custodial sentence of at least six years for all four men, with the possibility of suspending two years to take into account the time spent in custody.

Magistrate Alexis Diergaardt will sentence the men today.

ELLANIE SMIT