

## Businessmen 'prey' on poor Namibians to poach rhino for international syndicates

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**WELL-HEELED businessmen are allegedly driving the trade in poached rhino horn in Namibia, using marginal communities as foot soldiers, an amaBhungane/The Namibian investigation has revealed.**

The role of local entrepreneurs in the horn trade has not previously been highlighted. The popular perception in Namibia is that Chinese nationals are the kingpins in charge of the trade.

Senior police officials in the Kunene region, conservationists and businessmen in northern Namibia confirmed that the rhino horn traders especially target men from the semi-nomadic Hai//Om San and Himba communities because of their knowledge of the terrain, the animals and their movements.

The sources provided details of the way in which traders or their agents soften up these communities for poaching operations, particularly in the Etosha National Park in northern Namibia, and arm and train them in the use of firearms.

Namibia has the world's largest black rhino population, located mainly in Etosha, one of the country's key tourist attractions.

A senior police official, who asked to remain anonymous, said individuals and organisations in the northern business community – principally from Oshakati, Ondangwa and Ongwediva – were on the police radar as drivers of the illegal the

trade.

Said the police source: "The San and Himba know how the animals move, how the animals behave. And of course, they are very good trackers. That is why they are so sought-after by these people who are looking for foot soldiers."

Records show that most of those arrested for poaching come from deep in the rural areas. And police records for the past five years show that the majority of those arrested for poaching in Namibia are either locals or members of poor communities from Angola, Zimbabwe and Zambia close to the Namibian border.

However, the senior police source said when they appear in court, the suspects are able to pay bail of between N\$5 000 and N\$10 000, with the businessmen suspected of posting their bail.

While police refused to name suspects for fear of jeopardising investigations, some prominent northern businessmen have already been arrested and charged in connection with poaching and related wildlife crimes.

In 2015 Tobias Sheetu Amunyela, a resident of Okahao in the Omusati region and 21 others – mostly villagers – were arrested and charged with hunting protected species after police investigations linked them to black rhino carcasses in Etosha.

Amunyela, who has a number of business interests, leads an opulent lifestyle that has attracted both media and police attention. He lives in a large house and owns two bars at Okahao. Attempts to contact Amunyela were unsuccessful.

Another well-known northern Namibian businessman facing rhino poaching charges is Tangi Sheefeni Amon Namwandi, also known as 'Mox'.

Namwandi was arrested with fellow businessman Jairus Shaalukeni in 2016. Both are currently out on bail of N\$50 000 each.

The police allegedly found a rhino horn in Namwandi's Mercedes Benz during a sting operation after being tipped off that the two men were offering horn for sale.

A source familiar with Namwandi's activities alleged that he is more of a middleman than a leader.

"He must be working for someone, either here in Namibia or in China, but if there is any group operating here he is definitely not the one leading it," said the source.

"There is big money involved in rhino horn and those really behind it will never touch it themselves; they use small boys like Mox and his friend."

Black rhino horn fetches the best prices on the Chinese and Vietnamese markets – about US\$60 000 (N\$800 000) per kilogramme.

Interviewed last week, Namwandi vehemently denied involvement in any poaching syndicate.

"I am a printer by profession. I run my own printing company and I get tenders for up to N\$10 million from the

government," he said, adding that his house and his vehicles were all bought with bank financing.

Namwandi confirmed that a rhino horn was found in his vehicle, but said it belonged to a stranger he had given a lift. He said he had no knowledge of the horn until the police discovery.

"The guy asked me to give him a lift to Chinatown [in Windhoek] from the gym. He asked us to stop at the service station close to Chinatown so that he can buy airtime. The next thing, my car is surrounded by police and the owner of those things was gone," he said.

Namwandi said he tried to call the person and claimed to have tracked down an address, though he did not know the man's name.

"I still cannot find that guy, up to today," he said.

He said he has suffered financial losses over the arrest and charge and is thinking about changing his company name.

"I have never been convicted. Police found rhino horns in my car, that's all. This is a witch hunt against me."

Another prominent individual arrested for poaching is Gerson Kandjii (52), a paramedic formerly attached to the Namibian national football team.

Kandjii was arrested in November 2014 in connection with rhino poaching in Etosha.

While out on bail, he was arrested and charged with the murder of Reinhardt Schmidt in February 2015 on Schmidt's private hunting farm, Hoodia, outside Kalkrand in the Hardap region.

*Africa Geographic* reported that the retired German businessman was scheduled to become the custodian of several black rhinos under a state-run breeding programme, though the local media reported that the murder took place during an armed robbery.

While he was out on bail, Kandjii and another man were again arrested and charged in December 2016, in connection with an attack on a white rhino herd on a farm in the Omaheke region in which a bull and a pregnant cow were killed and another cow and bull were injured. For that case, it appears he has been denied bail.

He is facing a fourth charge in a case of unlawful possession of a firearm and ammunition.

"This is not some small operation," a senior police official said of the rhino poaching in the Kunene region.

On a number of occasions police have found dismantled firearms and food hidden in areas close to the Etosha fence and suspected that they were for poachers.

"You will find people parked in their big luxury cars under trees in random places. We know that they are there to either take food or weapons to the poachers," another source said.

*The Namibian* reported in 2015 that the environment ministry planned to construct a proper security fence on the park

boundary in a bid to fight rhino poaching.

Because of funds shortages, the fence has not been completed yet.

Environment minister Pohamba Shifeta was quoted as saying the government's "efforts to fight poaching will be futile" unless the fence is upgraded, as "criminals have unhindered access in and out the park, despite the patrolling efforts".

### COMPLEX OPERATION

Explaining how poachers are recruited, the senior police official said that the trader or recruiter first identifies a community, studies it and identifies who to approach.

The recruiter then goes on to establish a relationship of trust with the potential poacher, and sometimes his entire family, by giving them money or providing them food.

Firearms are provided and, where necessary, training is given. He added that in some cases there are known poachers in an area who can be approached directly to negotiate a price for a poaching operation.

The poachers are at the bottom of the payment chain. Police and conservation sources said they are not paid by the horn or weight of horn, but a fixed amount of between N\$5 000 and N\$10 000 per poaching operation, which could last up to two weeks.

"They prey on the poor because these people are desperate to make ends meet," the source said. He added that villagers were generally uneducated and unaware of the larger implications of their actions.

"The poachers easily take this money because they come from where there is nothing. To be given that much at once is a score. The real trade and exchange of big money happens between business people and whoever sells the horns on the international market."

The police source said Namibian businessmen acted as go-betweens and facilitators, and in some cases did not touch the horn. They organised the recruitment of the poachers and were responsible for connecting the poacher with the buyer.

The distribution chain also included those responsible for smuggling the horn out of the country.

Police records suggest that most of the "exporters" are Chinese nationals, sometimes based in neighbouring countries. Ondjiva, in southern Angola, is regarded as an organised crime hub from which smugglers operate.

*The Namibian* reported in April 2018 that most Chinese nationals who have been jailed in Namibia were guilty of wildlife crimes. Most of them were found in possession of rhino horns while on their way out of the country.

In 2015, Chinese national Li Zhibing, a shop owner at Otjiwarongo, was jailed after pleading guilty to attempting to smuggle 14 rhino horns out of Namibia.

A retired police officer said that there are strong indications that a number of Chinese nationals who have come to Namibia under the guise of wanting to start businesses – mostly in the retail sector – in fact work for international

poaching syndicates.

Police Inspector General Sebastian Ndeitunga was quoted in 2017 as saying a locally based Chinese-run syndicate has been sending rhino horns disguised as coffee products from Namibia to China since 2016.

Evidence points to the predominance of Namibians in wildlife crime, but also highlight its multinational character.

A total of 246 Namibians were charged with poaching between 2014 and 2018, followed by Angolans (31), Zambians (25), Chinese (17), Botswana (7) and Congolese (3). One Zimbabwean and one Tanzanian were charged.

According to *National Geographic* magazine, rhino poaching in Africa escalated from 262 animals killed in 2008 to 1 342 in 2015.

The World Economic Forum reported that in 2016 wildlife trafficking was the fourth most lucrative global crime after drugs, human trafficking and arms sales, with a value of between N\$98 billion and N\$322 billion.

### POSITIVE SIGNS

Environment ministry spokesperson Romeo Muyunda said that after 2015, when twice the number of rhinos were poached as in the previous year, the ministry redoubled its anti-poaching efforts, with positive results.

In 2015, 91 cases of rhino poaching were opened and 96 people arrested. That year rhino poaching peaked in Namibia, with 95 animals killed. In 2016, 82 people were arrested and 135 cases opened.

The number of rhinos killed has since fallen to 60 in 2016 and 36 in 2017, according to Muyunda. However, two rhinos were poached in the first four months of 2018.

Neither Muyunda nor Steve Felton, the Namibian representative of the World Wildlife Fund, would reveal the size of the rhino population in the country, "for security reasons".

Muyunda said the ministry is aware of poaching syndicates operating in Namibia using locals or organisations made up of Namibian citizens.

Environment permanent secretary Malan Lindeque, recently said that although poaching has been a problem in recent years, Namibia now has a healthy and viable black rhino population after their near-extinction since the 1960s.

He said white rhinos, of which there had been none left in Namibia, have been reintroduced and that their numbers are increasing steadily.

A source in wildlife conservation also struck an optimistic note, saying that while the Kunene region bordering Etosha has lost many rhinos to poachers, it had not been as hard-hit as South Africa's Kruger Park.