



Smugglers may appeal against sentences

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The High Court has granted permission to four Chinese nationals to appeal against their 14-year prison sentences for trying to smuggle 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin out of Namibia.

The permission was granted on Tuesday when Li Zhibing, 53, Li Xiaoliang, 30, Pu Xuexin, 49, and Wang Hui, 40, appeared before Deputy Judge President Hosea Angula.

The four men were arrested between March and May 2014 in what has been termed Namibia's largest rhino-horn-smuggling case.

The men were each sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment by Windhoek Magistrate Alexis Diergaardt at the end of their trial on 30 September 2016.

Their appeal against their prison sentences is set to be heard on 3 December. Judges Alfred Siboleka and Boas Usiku have been assigned to hear the appeal.

According to Nampa the convicts' lawyer, Nambili Mhata, was directed to file his heads of argument on behalf of his clients with the registrar of the High Court before or on 14 November.

State prosecutor Simba Nduna was ordered to file his papers before or on 23 November.

Mhata is disputing his clients' jail terms as "shocking", while the State is convinced that they are guilty of money laundering too, and thus seeks to annul the regional court ruling which acquitted them on that charge.

Xiaoliang, Zhibing and Xuexin were caught with rhino horns, worth N\$2.3 million, and a leopard skin, valued at N\$50 000, in their luggage on 23 March 2014 at Hosea Kutako International Airport.

Wang, who was the kingpin of the smuggling operation, was arrested in May that year at the Windhoek Country Club and Resort.

All four men were found guilty on charges of unlawful dealing in controlled wildlife products, unlawful possession of wildlife products and unlawful export of wildlife products from Namibia on 16 September 2016.

They were acquitted on a charge of money laundering after the prosecution failed to prove this charge beyond reasonable doubt.

Thirty months of Zhibing, Xuexin and Xiaoliang's sentences were conditionally suspended for five years, while 28 months of Wang's sentence was suspended.

During sentencing Diergaardt said any sentence other than imprisonment would send a message to the international community that criminals could come to Namibia and commit wildlife crimes with impunity.

The 14-year prison terms were welcomed in Namibia's wildlife circles in 2016 when the four men were convicted and sentenced.

"This case has by far been Namibia's biggest rhino-horn-smuggling case involving 14 rhino horns. The ministry is extremely heartened by the cooperation of all the stakeholders, which are the law-enforcement agencies, the justice system and the

media, who worked very hard since this case was first reported and ensured it resulted in a successful conviction," the environment ministry said at the time.

The ministry added that this kind of cooperation would go a long way in ensuring that rhinos, elephants and other specially protected animals were protected for the benefit of future generations.

The four men are serving their prison sentences at the Windhoek Central Correctional Facility.