

Justice ministry to prioritise wildlife crime

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Government is tightening the noose on wildlife crime syndicates as the country's flora and fauna increasingly become endangered.

DEPUTY minister of justice Lidwina Shapwa says to address transnational organised crime, Namibia will take a serious approach to combat wildlife crime.

Shapwa made this statement at the 28th session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in Vienna, Austria, on Monday.

The commission acts as the principal policymaking body of the United Nations in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice as part of the UN's congress on crime prevention and criminal justice held every five years.

Shapwa stated that Namibia is gravely concerned by the growing incidents of wildlife crime, including poaching and the unsustainable logging of timber.

"Namibia is particularly susceptible to wildlife crime, and as a result, the Namibian government has partnered with stakeholders since 2011 to combat the illegal poaching of and trading in wildlife and wildlife products," she said.

Shapwa added that the government has put in place strict measures to combat wildlife crime and address issues related to the exploitation of the country's wildlife.

"[Measures include] involving local communities in wildlife conservation, enhancing investigation skills and the capacity of law-enforcement agencies, and imposing heavy sentences on perpetrators of such criminal activities," she explained.

Shapwa, along with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, has organised a side-event under the theme 'Combating Wildlife Crime in Namibia through Smart Partnerships,' which takes place in Vienna yesterday.

The minister added that Namibia would be making concerted efforts towards including a gender perspective in the criminal justice system, reducing discrimination and violent crimes, increasing engagement with victim communities, and building public confidence and cooperation with criminal justice agencies.

The environment ministry's public relations officer, Romeo Muyunda, told The Namibian that they also consider wildlife crime a priority crime because of its relation to poaching.

"If you have illegal products in your possession, it means you got it through illegal means. So, we're treating it as a serious issue," he said. Muyunda added that in recent years, the punishment for these criminal activities has become stricter. If caught, a suspect can be sentenced to 25 years in prison, a N\$25 million fine, or both.

"This includes possession, especially for high-valued species like elephants and rhinos", he continued.

Furthermore, he added that it is essential to discourage any markets for such products, as they have a negative economic impact.

Data provided by the ministry of environment shows that in 2019, a total of 23 high-valued species have been poached. Seven elephants and 16 rhinos are documented to have been poached this year.

Muyunda also said poaching should be taken very seriously because it has an economic impact which affects one of the country's most important industries: tourism.

The tourism sector contributes significantly to GDP, being the third-largest contributor to GDP.

"We say our tourism is based on wildlife and landscape, mostly wildlife. People come to Namibia to see rhinos, and if that rhino is killed, people won't come [here] anymore."

Furthermore, Muyunda stated that wildlife aids in empowering communities through conservancies that generate revenue, which is pumped back into those communities.

"If this is affected, our communities won't be receiving the income that they're currently receiving in millions, as well as jobs. So, the economic impact is far-reaching," he said.