

Police, suspected poacher exchange gunfire

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A 40-YEAR-OLD suspected rhino poacher exchanged gunfire with a team of 15 Namibian Police officers and members of the Namibian Defence Force for nearly two hours on a farm outside Otavi on Sunday.

The Otjozondjupa regional crime investigations coordinator, deputy commissioner Naukalemo Andreas, said in an interview with Nampa yesterday that the exchange of gunfire started about noon on Sunday, and ended at 14h00 after the suspect allegedly abandoned the rifle he was using.

Andreas explained that the suspect was spotted by workers at Farm Streben, situated less than 40 kilometres south-west of Otavi, at about 12h00, allegedly armed with a hunting rifle and two butcher knives.

The farmworkers then alerted the police at Otavi, who also called for reinforcements from Kombat.

The combined police team followed the suspect's footprints on the farm.

"The poacher spotted the police officers first and opened fire," said Andreas.

The suspect also started running with the aim of escaping on foot, but police officers called in an NDF helicopter, which also joined in

the pursuit of the suspect.

At about 23h00 on Sunday, the suspect was arrested, and was allegedly found in possession of a piece of a rhino horn, ammunition, and a water container at Farm Marula, which is adjacent to farm Streben.

Andreas added that no one sustained injuries during the exchange of gunfire.

The suspect, who is believed to be from the Kavango West region, is expected to appear in the Otavi Magistrate's Court today on charges of hunting protected game, possession of a rhino horn, and an unlicensed firearm and ammunition.

A charge of attempted murder for firing at police officers has also been added. Police investigations into the matter are continuing.

Meanwhile, the ministry of environment has assured the public that it prioritises the preservation of the country's wildlife, and will always investigate cases where wildlife crimes are suspected.

The ministry was reacting to news of the recent discovery of two elephant carcasses in the Kunene region.

On Friday, a tourist in the Malansrus area near Twyfelfontein reported that she had spotted a dead elephant along the D2612 road. In an audio recording which circulated on WhatsApp, the woman detailed that locals were playing on and taking selfies with the carcass.

"Please guys, it's very sad what's going on. The young bull is still there, and there are local people taking selfies and going on it. It's very, very sad. I beg you to remove him, just for respect," the woman pleaded.

Ministry spokesperson Romeo Muyunda confirmed the incident, and said after an investigation, the elephant was found to have died of natural causes.

"It was not poached. We suspect that it was fighting with another elephant and must have sustained some internal bleeding, leading to its death," he explained.

The carcass was intact upon discovery, and was found not to have been poisoned.

Muyunda explained that in such an instance, the meat is distributed to communities in the area, while the tusks are added to the ministry's stockpile.

In a separate incident, the carcass of a young elephant bull was discovered in the Khowarib Schlucht, an area 20 kilometres upriver from the Khowarib Lodge.

The carcass was found bloodied, and with its tusks removed.

Eliaser Naftali, a ministry official based at Opuwo, confirmed the discovery yesterday, and said a team had been sent to the area to investigate further.

He added that the carcass was first discovered by tour guides at the lodge.

At the time of speaking to *The Namibian*, Naftali could only confirm that the elephant had been discovered, but had no further information on the circumstances surrounding its death.

Through the course of the past week, a total of four new cases of wildlife crime were registered, as detailed in the weekly wildlife crime statistics report compiled by the ministry's intelligence and investigation unit and the Namibian Police's Protected Resources Division.

A total of six suspects were arrested, four of them in relation to elephant poaching and trafficking. The report detailed that among the eight wildlife products seized during this time were three elephant tusks, one elephant tusk piece and two elephant skins.

Information provided by the ministry indicates that Namibia currently has about 69 391 kilogrammes of ivory in its stockpile, valued at over N\$125 million.

Of this, 39 427 kilogrammes (roughly N\$71 million in value) was confiscated from people involved in wildlife crime.

Minister of environment Pohamba Shifeta recently announced that the ministry had commissioned an aerial wildlife survey for the Zambezi and Kavango East regions to get an update of the number and distribution of elephants in the north-east of the country.

Muyunda said besides the elephant counting, the aerial surveys will also provide general surveillance of the area.

“We are starting that mid-September, probably after the 20th,” he revealed.

– Nampa-Own report