

No bail for alleged rhino poaching ring kingpin

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Two white rhino approaching a feedlot at a lodge in Namibia. Image used for demonstrative purposes. Photo: Nampa

A BUSINESSMAN based in northern Namibia who is charged over the poaching of two rhinos near Etosha National Park is facing an extended stay in jail, after his appeal against being denied bail failed in the Windhoek High Court last week.

The magistrate who turned down Petrus Shihepo Shimuningeni's request to be granted bail correctly found it would not be in the best interest of the public to release him on bail, acting judge Eileen Rakow said in a judgement in which an appeal by Shimuningeni against the magistrate's ruling ended up being struck from the court roll.

The judge also said she was not persuaded that magistrate Peingondjabi Shipo misdirected himself in any manner when he refused Shimuningeni's application to be granted bail in the Outjo Magistrate's Court in April this year.

Shimuningeni (36) was arrested on two charges of hunting specially protected game in February this year.

Both charges stem from the poaching of two rhinos – the one a white rhino, and the other a black rhino – at a private game reserve near Etosha National Park in December last year.

During his bail hearing, Shimuningeni told the court he was a businessman owning a bar situated between Ondangwa and Ongwediva, and also a shop, a restaurant and gambling machines. He said he spent the last week of December last year on vacation at Swakopmund, and denied that he was present at the game reserve where the rhinos were poached or that he even knew where the reserve is situated.

Acting judge Rakow also recounted in her judgement that the police officer investigating the killing of the rhinos at the game reserve testified that Shimuningeni was suspected to be the kingpin in a rhino poaching syndicate, and that he allegedly organised the poaching ring and funded the poachers by providing them with a rental car and money for food and fuel.

The judge further noted that the investigating officer testified that cellphone records linked Shimuningeni to four other men facing the same charges with him, and that the investigator said he had evidence that Shimuningeni sold the horns removed from the poached rhinos and shared the proceeds of the sale with his co-accused.

One of the men charged with Shimuningeni, Silas Dimbulukeni Tileinge (25), also testified in support of Shimuningeni's application for bail, acting judge Rakow recounted.

Tileinge told the court he was arrested in February this year at the game reserve where the rhinos had been poached in December. He said he and another person were at the reserve because they were looking for meat, and that security guards who caught them assaulted them and forced them to say who had sent them to the reserve. According to Tileinge he then mentioned the name and phone number of Shimuningeni, whom he only knew as the owner of a bar that he used to visit, and by doing that he falsely implicated Shimuningeni.

In his ruling, however, the magistrate found Shimuningeni had some influence over Tileinge, and concluded that he could not rely on Tileinge's testimony, the judge also noted.

The other accused charged with Shimuningeni and Tileinge are Pentecosta Ruhuzu and Naftal Nghinomenwa Hangula, who were both arrested in January, and George Morning Nanyeni, who was arrested in February. Defence lawyer Marcia Amupolo represented Shimuningeni during his bail hearing and in the appeal. The prosecution was not represented during the appeal hearing in September.