

Illegal Timber harvesting plagues Zambezi region

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• By Vitalio Angula

A Police operation code name 'Clarion' last week arrested 127 illegal immigrants from neighbouring Zambia who were suspected of engaging in the illegal harvesting of protected wood species in the Zambezi region.

Namibia Police (Nampol), Zambezi regional Commander, Andreas Shilelo told **Confidente** the immigrants were charged under the Illegal Immigrant Act and given forty-eight hours to leave the country and were subsequently deported.

"Most of them we arrested, where not found harvesting timber but we took them from the area where the timber had been cut, that is why we suspected them because there is no one else who can do that. It is only them," Shilelo informed **Confidente**.

The Regional Commander further said, "We found a truck, a tipper truck that was being used to carry the timber to Zambia. They then process the timber in Zambia and acquire permits to transport the timber back to Walvis-Bay and export it abroad. We found plus/minus forty logs that had been left to dry before being loaded and transported to Zambia.

Executive Director at the Ministry of Environment, Tourism and Forestry, Teofilus Nghitila told **Confidente** the illegal timber harvesting had been on-going for the past few weeks and is part of organised criminal syndicates, who export the protected wood products to Asian market namely China where there is a large demand for hardwood which is of good quality.

"The Zambians are now invading Namibia. Harvesting the timber illegally! They take the timber logs back to Zambia and process documentation for it there, they then transport that same timber through Namibia for Chinese markets," Nghitila said.

"We are working with our Zambian counterparts to curb this problem because it has become worrisome. The species they are harvesting 'Teak' is a protected species. It takes these trees one hundred years to grow. Our Savannah Forest is not fit for the commercial exploitation of timber," Nghitila added.

John Grobler, a Namibian based investigative journalist who has been covering the export of Namibian timber to Chinese markets over the years told **Confidente** that timber has an estimated value of N\$13 billion had been exported through Walvis Bay destined mostly for China where there was a demand for endangered tree species such as Rosewood and Teak.

"A tree can yield between four to six cubic meters and this costs roughly 340 Namibia Dollars. The same wood sells for anything between \$ 2737 and \$ 4114 in Chinese currency (Yuan)," Grobler informed **Confidente**.

Grobler said the real value of timber being smuggled out is hard to determine because of the criminal element involved in the illicit activity.

"These trucks carry at least 35 tons of timber in sealed containers and at the moment there is no accurate data available to provide specifics," Grobler acknowledged.