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Wildlife crime

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SPECIAL WILDLIFE CRIME COURTS HIGHLY EFFECTIVE

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Assets and goods seized and forfeited to the state during the finalisation of wildlife crime cases at special courts last year were valued at more than N\$4 million.

The seized items included illegal wildlife products, firearms and vehicles used in wildlife crimes.

According to the Wildlife Protection and Law Enforcement Report in Namibia, the judicial system faces a range of challenges in dealing with high rates of crime and ensuring justice is served; a central hurdle is a growing backlog of cases on the court rolls.

"This has been induced in part by the massive increase in wildlife crime over the past decade, with extreme years seeing 3.94 times as many court cases registered as finalised."

Effective tool

The report notes that during 2022, special courts dedicated to hearing wildlife cases proved to be an effective tool in reducing the current backlog.

"Of the 380 convictions in 503 wildlife crime cases of individual suspects concluded during 2022, some of the most noteworthy sentences were delivered by the special courts dedicated to wildlife crimes."

The report says the special courts finalised 121 wildlife crime cases and were among the standout activities for 2022.

"The sudden rise in wildlife crime over the past decade and the related rapid increase in the arrests of suspects temporarily overwhelmed the capacity of the judiciary to deal with all the cases appearing on the court rolls."

Significant impact

According to the report, 2019 saw the biggest gap between registered and finalised cases: 548 cases were registered but only 139 were finalised, a ratio of 3.94 to 1.

By 2021, the annual ratio had been reduced to 2.43.

"The introduction of temporary special courts dealing with wildlife crime during 2022, dealing only with wildlife cases, has further decreased the annual ratio to 1.45 to 1 (355 cases registered, 244 cases finalised)."

Proven success

The report states that while this means that the backlog is still increasing each year, it is growing at a much slower rate than four years ago.

In April 2022, the first special court dedicated to wildlife crimes in Namibia was held simultaneously in Katima Mulilo and Rundu. The innovative measure was a resounding success, with 80 cases finalised and 68 convictions achieved.

This motivated a rapid follow-up, with another special court held at Okahao and Outapi in September. Here, another 41 cases could be finalised with 35 convictions.