

Bail hearing in rare-plant poaching case



Romeo Muyunda

By **Suzie Shefeni**

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A suspected plant-trafficking kingpin, Diana Mashiku (29) from Tanzania, and her three Namibian co-accused are scheduled to apply for bail on Thursday in the Opuwo Magistrate's Court.

Mashiku and her Namibian assistants – Veisiruaije Tjavara (25), Jenniter Simataa (37) and Tjivinda Unatavi (31) – were arrested for allegedly being in possession of 46 *Adenia pechuelii* plants, known as elephant's foot, which they allegedly harvested without a permit.

They were arrested between 21 October and 10 November in the Okondjombo area of the Kunene region.

Mashiku has been charged with contravening the Prevention of Organised Crime Act and the Forest Act.

This charge carries heavy sentences with fines, up to 100 years' imprisonment, or both.

Mashiku's Namibian co-accused have been charged with contravening the Forest Act, which carries fines of up to N\$8 000, or two years' imprisonment, or both.

Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism spokesperson Romeo Muyunda said yesterday there is a growing trend of criminal syndicates using locals to illegally harvest Namibia's unique plant species.

"This case is one of many where international poaching syndicates use Namibian enablers to persuade local community members to find and harvest the plants for a small fee. The

plants are then smuggled across international borders to be sold to plant collectors for substantial sums of money," he says.

Muyunda says Mashiku's capture was a major breakthrough.

The Kunene region's crime investigations head, deputy commissioner Paavo Iiyambo, urges citizens to report any suspicious activity.

"I would like to encourage the community members of the Khorixas, Sesfontein, Puros and Okondjombo areas, where these protected plant species are illegally harvested, to report to the authorities any suspicious movement in their area of jurisdiction," he says.

Executive director of environment, forestry and tourism Teofilus Nghitila says the ministry takes biodiversity crimes very seriously.

"These criminals will not stop until our plants are all gone, and there is nothing left for Namibians to benefit from and enjoy. We simply cannot let that happen, therefore I charge all our officials across the country to be on high alert to apprehend perpetrators," he says.

Adenia pechuelii is a threatened plant species due to the high level of harvesting and slow growth and reproduction rates.