

## GRN steps up measures to combat environmental crimes



**Niël Terblanché**

The government convened a stakeholder forum on wildlife protection and relevant law enforcement issues.

This initiative comes in response to the increasing concerns highlighted by international financial institutions, which have listed environmental crimes, including wildlife crimes and money laundering, among the top threats in Namibia's national risk assessment.

The forum is also partly aimed at preventing Namibia from being grey-listed by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

Pohamba Shifeta, the Minister of Environment, Forestry, and Tourism, opened the special forum and pointed to Namibia's historical success in wildlife protection post-independence.

"Since controlling a surge in poaching in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Namibia has experienced comparatively low levels of illegal killing of wildlife, particularly rhinos and elephants," Shifeta said.

He credited the changes in protected areas and wildlife management policies, as well as the rapid growth of community-based natural resource management programs, for the upward trends in wildlife populations.

Despite these successes, Shifeta acknowledged that criminal activities related to wildlife and other natural resources are escalating globally and nationally.

He said that rhino poaching is still a critical issue, with 83 rhinos poached in 2023, a slight increase from the 79 poached in 2022.

The Ministry of Environment, Forestry, and Tourism, along with its partners, has developed tactical responses aimed at dismantling key poaching syndicates this year.

Shifeta praised the efforts of ground staff and the Blue Rhino Task Team, whose pre-emptive arrests prevented significant rhino losses.

Pangolin trafficking also saw a sharp increase in 2023, which was attributed to stronger sentences handed down by Special Courts in 2022.

The Office of the Prosecutor General has continued these efforts, with special courts planned for the current year.

Shifeta stressed the need for a better understanding of the illicit pangolin trade.

He said that Namibia's elephant population has been steadily increasing, with minimal poaching incidents last year due to vigilant anti-poaching forces.

The illicit ivory trade, however, remains a concern, as demonstrated by the seizure of 102 tusks during the reporting period.

Namibia is a crucial transit country for traffickers, and Shifeta stressed the importance of continued vigilance and intelligence-led operations.

The trafficking of live plants for the international ornamental plant market has also emerged as a major concern.

Shifeta reported the arrest of an international kingpin from Tanzania in possession of the near-endemic *Adenia pechuelii* plant in Opuwo, thanks to local law enforcement and the Blue Rhino Task Team's support.

Shifeta outlined the government's commitment to strengthening crime prevention and law enforcement through coordinated activities, strong ground presence, dedicated investigation units, technological use, and collaboration among various government agencies, including the Ministry of Environment, Forestry, and Tourism, Police, Army, Judiciary, Intelligence Service, and communities.

The forum also launched the 2023 National Report on Wildlife Protection and Law Enforcement, showcasing Namibia's intersectoral commitment to fighting environmental crime.

According to Shifeta, the report is a collaborative effort among various government agencies and funding partners that provides detailed wildlife crime data and highlights Namibia's wildlife crime database's achievements.

At the same event, the Prosecutor General, Martha Imalwa, stressed the urgency of the forum, especially with the threat of FATF graylisting.

“Wildlife crime in Namibia has become a serious concern that threatens our national heritage and damages our environment,” Imalwa said.

She called for innovative techniques and tireless efforts from law enforcement agencies to combat wildlife and environmental crimes.

Imalwa praised the collaboration among stakeholders, highlighting the success of special courts dedicated to wildlife crime.

She said that these courts, held in various locations, including Katima Mulilo, Rundu, Okahao, and Outapi, demonstrated the effectiveness of coordinated efforts.

She added that the ongoing Special Courts in Oshakati and the upcoming ones in Windhoek reiterate the commitment to eradicating wildlife crime.

The forum also recognised the efforts of donors and stakeholders within the criminal justice system, including the police, the Office of the Prosecutor-General, the Judiciary, and the Ministry of Environment, Forestry, and Tourism.

Imalwa reiterated the vital importance of protecting Namibia's fauna and flora and ensuring that those who transgress the laws face the full force of the law.