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A file picture of rhinos on Dawie Groenewald's farm. Picture: Reuters

Judge demands answers over rhino poaching case delays

By Zelda Venter  7h ago



Pretoria - More than a decade ago, Limpopo game farmer Dawie Groenewald and his co-accused were arrested on a multitude of rhino poaching-related charges, yet their criminal trial is yet to start - and a judge wants answers.

Groenewald and his eight co-accused once again briefly appeared in the Gauteng High Court, Pretoria this week, and their case was postponed to March 1.

But this is only to pave the way forward, and it is expected that the trial will not go ahead on this date.

Judge Bert Bam made it clear this week that he wanted answers as to why the trial had been delayed for so long, "This case has been dragging its heels for very long. I want to know what the delays are and what is going to be done to streamline the process," the judge

said.

He demanded a detailed affidavit from the defence team, setting out what caused the delays. "I want a detailed account of what happened. I have no idea what is going on and it is very peculiar that this case is not moving forward. If I find that anyone has delayed this matter on purpose, I will consider making an appropriate order in that regard," Judge Bam said.



A file picture of Dawie Groenewald and his wife, Sariette. Picture: File

Groenewald, alleged to be the rhino horn syndicate kingpin, and his co-accused, who include a helicopter pilot, two veterinarians and professional hunters, have appeared in court on several occasions over the years, during which their trial was postponed.

One of the delays was caused as the group were awaiting a Constitutional Court ruling confirming the lifting of South Africa's moratorium on domestic trade in rhino horn.

This resulted in the state dropping about 60 charges against the accused, and an amended charge sheet was subsequently served on the group earlier.

They are, however, still facing about 1 600 charges, ranging from racketeering, money laundering, illegal hunting of rhino to dealing in rhino horn.

One of the new glitches at the start of the hearing was the fact that advocate Piet van Wyk SC, who had been representing them over the years, passed away last year due to Covid-19. A new legal team took over the defence, headed by advocate Jaap Cilliers SC and his team.

Prosecutor Joanie Spies meanwhile told the court that the prosecution was definitely not to blame for the delay in the case.

The hearing was postponed in 2018 to this week, after it emerged that the first trial date would be in 2021, due to the complexity of the case and the length of time the trial was expected to last.

The prosecution at the time said it had been ready for more than a year to call its witnesses.

The defence on a previous occasion estimated that the criminal trial could last between six months to a year once it had started.

All the accused are out on bail.

The group, said to be one the largest rhino syndicates in the country, were arrested in September 2010 after a 15-month investigation called "Project Cruiser". They were allegedly linked to hundreds of illegal rhino-poaching operations over four years.

In 2013, 26 rhino carcasses, with their horns removed, were found buried on Groenewald's farm in Musina.

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