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Rhino horn trade case delayed again 12 years after arrest of suspects

Alleged rhino kingpin Dawie Groenewald and co-accused were arrested 12 years ago, but the trial is yet to start. Picture: Zelda Venter

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Pretoria - The most delayed criminal trial in the country – of an alleged syndicate said to be illegally trading in rhino horn – was yesterday once again postponed, this time to January 16 next year.

Limpopo game farmer Dawie Groenewald and his co-accused were arrested about 12 years ago on a multitude of rhino poaching-related charges, yet their criminal trial has yet to start.

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Groenewald and his eight co-accused once again briefly appeared in the Gauteng High Court, Pretoria, yesterday, where their trial was postponed to next year.

Yesterday's appearance was not for a trial, but was for case management by Judge Hennie de Vos. He was told that some of the accused would later this year issue another constitutional challenge against the charges they were facing. The criminal trial would thus not be able to start until another court had ruled on the constitutionality of these charges.

Judge Bert Bam, who has since returned, last year made it clear that he wanted answers as to why the trial had been delayed for so long.

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"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.

However, in light of the constitutional challenge, and although the prosecution has all along made clear that it is ready to proceed, the trial will not be able to resume, Judge de Vos, who has taken over the trial, was told.

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.

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One of the delays was caused as the group were awaiting a Constitutional Court ruling confirming the lifting of South Africa's moratorium on the 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. The group now hope that their renewed challenge against the charges will result in more or all of the charges being dropped.

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

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None of the accused has yet pleaded to any of the charges. The court was earlier told that once the trial resumed, it was expected to last about a year.

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