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Skukuza court slaps rhino poachers with 19 years in jail after Kruger National Park arrest

Two Mozambican nationals have been sentenced to an effective 19 years in jail after they were cornered and arrested by rangers in the Kruger National Park. File Picture: EPA/SHIRAAZ MOHAMED

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Pretoria - The Skukuza Regional Court has sentenced two rhino poachers to an effective 19 years in jail, after the two Mozambican nationals were arrested last month inside the Kruger National Park.

The court sentenced Lawrence Flaveo Cuetsele, 21, and Nelson Mhlongo, 34, after their arrest in connection with rhino poaching-related activities and possession of firearms with ammunition at the Kruger National Park.

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Mpumalanga police spokesperson, Brigadier Selvy Mohlala said the accused had entered the park through Tsokwane and Lower Sabi sections in March last year.

“It is said that the field rangers heard some gunshots whereby other rangers were activated and with the assistance of SANParks helicopter, three male suspects were cornered,” he said.

Mohlala said the poachers were in possession of a .458 Winchester Magnum hunting rifle fitted with a silencer, seven cartridges, one magazine case and a knife.

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They were also found with some bags and clothing.

“The police at Skukuza were informed about their capture and upon arrival, the suspects were arrested and charged accordingly.

“The investigation also revealed that Cuetsele and Mhlongo were Mozambican nationals who came to South Africa illegally, hence a charge of contravention of the Immigration Act was added upon the two.

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“The three suspects appeared before court where one of the suspects, Antony Tembe was granted bail, but that was the last time he was seen and he never set his foot in court again,” said Mohlala.

A warrant for arrest has since been issued for Tembe, who is still sought by the police.

“The case was then probed by the stock theft unit of the SAPS at Skukuza who made their investigation and presented the evidence before court against the two men,” he said.

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The two Mozambicans were sentenced as follows:

On the count of trespassing, the two were each sentenced to three years imprisonment.

On the count of contravention of the Immigration Act, the two accused were each sentenced to one year imprisonment.

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On the count of possession of a prohibited firearm, the two men were each sentenced to six years imprisonment.

For possession of unlicensed ammunition, the two were each sentenced to two years imprisonment.

On the count of possession of a dangerous weapon, the two were both sentenced to one year imprisonment.

“The court ordered that the sentence on the count of contravention of the Immigration Act will run concurrently with the sentence on trespassing. Meanwhile, the sentence on possession of unlicensed ammunition will run concurrently with the sentence on possession of prohibited firearm.

“The two accused will effectively be incarcerated for effective 19 years. Further than that, both accused were declared unfit to possess a firearm,” Mohlala said.

Provincial commissioner of police in Mpumalanga, Lieutenant General Semakaleng Daphney Manamela has commended the close cooperation among different agencies which resulted in the lengthy sentence.

“We are delighted with the cooperation that was displayed among the team of field rangers, the investigators, the prosecution team as well as the judiciary which culminated into the impressive sentence,” said Manamela.

Earlier this year, the Department Of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) said at least 451 rhinos were poached in South Africa in 2021, including 327 within government reserves and 124 on private property.

While this marks a 24% decrease in rhino poaching compared with the pre-Covid period in 2019, there has been an increase in poaching on private properties, the department added.

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