

GAME SLAUGHTER CRACKDOWN

Hefty sentences for rhino poachers after new wildlife trafficking strategy starts to bite



From left: Convicted rhino poachers Nhamo Muyambo, Trymore Chauke, Francis Chitiyo, Abraham Moyane and Simba Masinge. (Photos: Supplied)



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The recent sentencing of six Zimbabweans — members of the so-called Chitiyo Rhino Poaching Gang — to prison terms ranging from 16 to 20 years suggests that authorities are slowly but steadily making inroads in tackling the poaching scourge.

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One of the goals of the National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking is to significantly increase the number of arrests and convictions for all types of wildlife trafficking.

[Approved by Cabinet](#) on 10 May 2023, the strategy is the first of its kind in South Africa. Its primary objective is to empower law enforcement structures to prevent wildlife trafficking that poses a threat to national security.

The strategy will be implemented over five years.

To reduce wildlife trafficking in South Africa, the government plans to develop, approve and implement law enforcement border management and customs and intelligence cooperation agreements with transit countries including Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Tanzania and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as end-market countries such as China, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Thailand.

On Tuesday, 20 June, Zimbabwean nationals Francis Chitiyo (35), Trymore Chauke (30), Meshack Chauke (27), Simba Masinge (32), Nhamo Muyambo (32) and Abraham Moyane (36) were sentenced in the Eastern Cape High Court in Makhanda.

Chitiyo was sentenced to an effective 20-year prison term; Muyambo to 19 years, Moyane to 18 years, Trymore Chauke and Masinge to 17 years each, and Meschack Chauke to 16 years.

Judge Gerald Bloem said that while the accused were not convicted of rhino horn theft and that the provisions of the Minimum Sentence Act did not apply to the facts of this case, he believed a sentence of 15 years in prison would be appropriate on the count of conspiracy to commit rhino horn theft.

In passing sentence, the judge emphasised the prevalence of rhino poaching; how they were killed; that the commission of the offences, in this case, was motivated by greed; and the lack of remorse shown by the accused. The result was that rehabilitation appeared remote and that prospective poachers should be deterred from poaching.

Five of the men, Meshack Chauke excluded, escaped from the Waainek Prison in Makhandla in October 2022 after their conviction. Following their escape, 13 rhinos were poached in the first three months of this year.

Read more in Daily Maverick: [Seven men, including five rhino poachers, escape through Makhandla prison window](#)

While the gang was in custody, no rhino poaching incidents were reported in the Eastern Cape.

In a second and unrelated case, Freedom Siyabonga Ndlovu was sentenced to 32 years in prison by the Skukuza Regional Court on Wednesday, 21 June on three counts of rhino poaching.



Freedom Siyabonga Ndlovu was sentenced to a 32-year jail term in the Skukuza Regional Court on 21 June for three counts of killing rhinos. (Photo: Supplied NPA)

Founder of Baby Rhino Rescue, Helena Kriel, welcomed the sentences and said that as long as there was a huge demand for rhino horns in China and Vietnam, placing the animals in a fortress would not deter poachers from getting to them.

Baby Rhino Rescue is an international organisation that primarily works with international donor funds and uses those funds towards projects with partners in South Africa.

In an interview with Kriel, who is based in Los Angeles, she told *Daily Maverick* that “our main focus is providing security to private rhino owners. We have gone on from providing milk, hay and medication to security. All of our funding now goes towards security at private rhino farms because that is the only way we feel that we will have the necessary impact.”

What was required to stop poachers in their tracks, she noted, was a much more effective operational system that followed a court case all the way through, ensuring that there was no bribery and that the poachers were imprisoned.

Kriel further explained that longer prison sentences were just one piece of the puzzle to end rhino poaching. Rhinos, she added, were better looked after by private custodians than in national parks.

Read more in Daily Maverick: [Saving private rhino – non-government owners of the animals succeed in stemming poaching carnage](#)

“Poaching depends on how high the level of security is. What we have found is that... poachers are not going to places where there is a high level of security functioning.”

Read more in Daily Maverick: [The global ban on the trade in rhino horn does not, and will not, work](#)

Kriel works with SA intelligence sources who are developing a security map for the entire country. Baby Rhino Rescue intends to roll out its elaborate security systems according to the map.

Wayne Bolton, anti-poaching activist and founder of One Land Love It, underlined that identifying genuine rhino safe havens and providing incentives to its “guardians” protecting the rhinos could be part of the solution.

Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) Barbara Creecy said during her recent debate on the budget vote in the National Assembly that the National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking recently adopted by Cabinet was a big step in the ongoing [battle against criminal wildlife activities](#), which include rhino and abalone poaching.

The minister also said the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve had become a rhino poaching hotspot and that the DFFE would support Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife to combat poaching and related wildlife crimes.

During her budget vote for 2023/24, Creecy said her department would invest [R40-million to improve](#) boundary fencing in the park.

Isaac Phaala, spokesperson for South African National Parks (SANParks), elaborated on how SANParks planned to deal with the bribery of park rangers by suspected syndicates.

“Rangers live in communities where these syndicates operate, which makes them vulnerable to intimidation, coercion and many other tactics employed by these criminals.

“We have programmes to assist colleagues who might feel threatened... the situation is not unique to SANParks. As with every organisation with high-value assets, their employees are bound to be infiltrated by criminals. We will soon be introducing integrity tests when recruiting rangers, but negotiations are ongoing with labour.” **DM**