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Major victory in rhino poaching war

Ian Small-Smith lawyer for Indalo, Capt Morne Viljoen, Adv Melanie van Rooyen of DPP Adv Buks Coetzee of DPP. | Supplied

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Johannesburg - The Eastern Cape High Court sitting in Makhanda imposed heavy prison sentences on six Zimbabwean nationals in what game reserve owners in the Eastern Cape have called a major breakthrough in the war against rhino poaching syndicates.

The men, Francis Chitiyo, 35, Trymore Chauke, 29, Mischeck Chauke, 27, Simba Masinge, 27, Nhamo Muyambo, 32, and Abraham Moyane, 36, were convicted of conspiracy to kill a rhino and steal the horns and unlawful possession of an unlicensed Voere 375 hunting rifle and ammunition on July 31, 2018 on the N2 near Makhanda. They were sentenced to effective imprisonment ranging from 16 to 20 years.

The court was packed with hundreds of employees, staff, and owners of various game reserves in the Eastern Cape.

In sentencing the six, Judge GH Bloem referred to the men as a well-organised group of criminals, arrested after stellar investigation by the SAPS, in particular Captain Morné Viljoen of the Eastern Cape Stock Theft Unit.

Viljoen and his team, acting on information, apprehended the poachers while they were travelling on the N2 to a local reserve to kill rhinos. They used a Ford and an Isuzu pick-up and concealed axes, knives, the rifle and ammunition in the vehicles.

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Although they have been in detention without bail since their arrest five years ago, all of them but Mischeck Chauke escaped from the Waainek Correctional Centre outside Makhanda in October 2022.

Trymore Chauke and Masinga were arrested shortly after their escape, but the others remained at large until April 2023. Their reign of terror after their escape lasted six months, and they have been linked to at least 13 new poaching incidents, mainly in the Eastern Cape.

Moyane was re-arrested in March 2023 on a reserve near Makhanda, but Muyambo and Chitiyo managed to escape. In a manhunt that lasted several weeks, the outstanding two were arrested in the early hours of May 20, 2023, at their hideaway in Mthatha by the Tactical Intervention Unit of the police and Crime Intelligence.

“We cannot express enough gratitude to the police and DPP (Director of Public Prosecutions) office in Makhanda for the quality of their work, and we take enormous comfort from this interaction with law enforcement in the Eastern

Cape,” said lawyer Ian Small-Smith, representing Indalo, a group of local game reserves.

“Combating poaching is an ongoing war. We spend millions of rand a year keeping our rhinos safe, but we will ultimately fail if we don’t have the local police and prosecution services ready and able to assist if our efforts on the reserves fall short,” Small-Smith said.

The escapees are expected to plead guilty to escaping charges in the next few weeks and to receive another 10 years of direct imprisonment for their escape. They will serve their time at the East London Maximum Security Prison.

“They are set to spend many years in jail on these offences and additional imprisonment on the escaping charges, and we understand that the authorities will soon charge them for the crimes they committed while on the run. We take comfort that they will not be eligible for parole because they escaped from lawful custody,” Small-Smith said.

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