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Rhino poaching gang receive hefty sentences

Nhamo Muyambo was sentenced to 19 years in prison and Francis Chitho received a 20-year prison sentence. Photo: DCS

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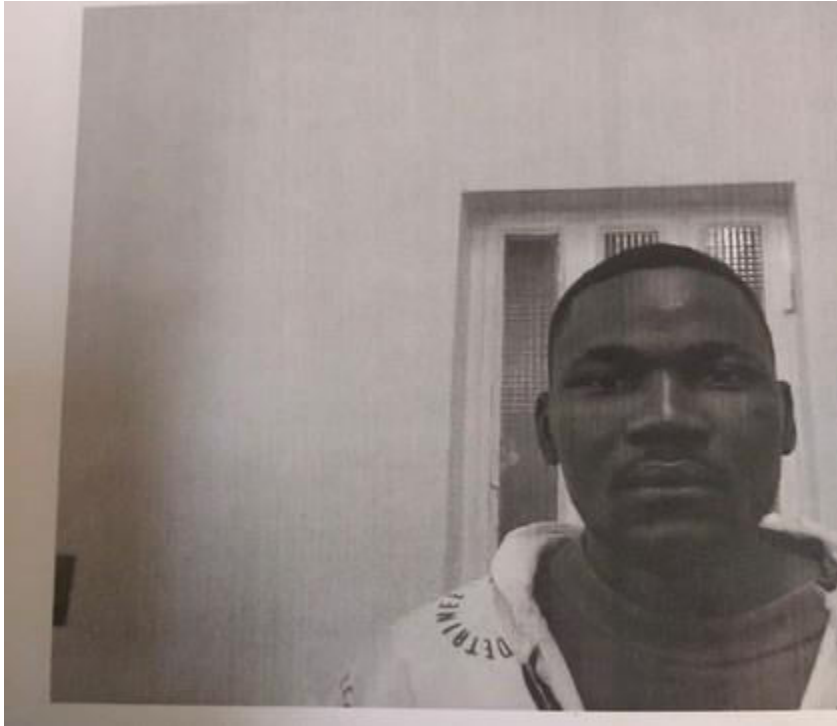
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Cape Town - Members of a rhino poaching gang were sentenced to heavy direct imprisonment sentences by the Eastern Cape High Court sitting in Makhanda.

The Zimbabwean nationals, Francis Chitho, 35; Trymore Chauke, 30; Meshack Chauke, 27; Simba Masinge, 32; Nhamo Muyambo, 32; and Abraham Moyane, 36, were convicted of conspiracy to commit theft of rhino horn and unlawful possession of firearms and ammunition.

Their jail terms range between 16 and 20 years.

Five of the men, except Meshach Chauke made [headlines](#) when they escaped from the [Makhanda Correctional Facility](#) in October 2022.



Trymore Chauke

They were part of a group of seven who escaped allegedly using hacksaw blades to cut the steel bars from cell 7 which housed 28 inmates.

Two weeks before their escape, five of them – Chitho, Trymore Chauke, Masinge, Muyambo and Moyane – were convicted for poaching rhino horns.

Abraham was [rearrested](#) at a private game reserve in Makhanda on April 10, 2023.

Chitho was sentenced to an effective 20-year jail term, Muyambo to 19 years, Moyane to 18 years, Trymore Chauke and Masinge to 17 years each, and Meshack Chauke to 16 years.

Eastern Cape spokesperson for the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), Luxolo Tyali said only two of the men were in South Africa legally.

Evidence before the court revealed before July 31, 2018, all the men lived in close proximity to each other some sharing accommodation in East London.

“At some point before their arrest on the said date, they conspired to jointly commit rhino poaching, to steal rhino horn and sell same into the lucrative illicit trade in the product,” Tyali said.

“They obtained an unlicensed 375 caliber hunting rifle, which was fitted with a silencer to suppress the gunshots, to avoid detection during their illegal hunt.”

On the afternoon of their arrest, the group travelled in six vehicles towards Makhanda where there are numerous game reserves housing populations of rhinos.

Before they could reach their destination, one of the vehicles broke down. The group was stopped by members of the police’s Rhino Poaching Task Team patrolling along the N2 highway while towing the broken down vehicle.

Inside the vehicles, police found two axes, knives, and cell phones. The disassembled hunting rifle was found concealed in the tailgate of one of the vehicles.

“While the gang was in custody, no rhino poaching incidents were reported in the Eastern Cape. However, since the escape of the five, 13 rhinos were poached during the first three months of 2023,” Tyali said.

“Investigations to establish the involvement of the gang in the said poachings are being conducted and further charges will be brought in the subsequent trial if they are linked.”

Director of Public Prosecutions in the Eastern Cape, Barry Madolo commended the investigating and prosecuting team for ensuring the group were handed lengthy jail terms even though they were not convicted of the actually killing of a rhino or theft of a rhino horn.

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