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STOCKPILE HIT

Parliament hears how ‘sophisticated syndicate’ stole 51 rhino horns from a state facility



A sedated and blindfolded white rhino before it has its horn trimmed at the North West ranch of rhino breeder John Hume on 16 October 2017. (Photo: Leon Neal / Getty Images)



By Kristin Engel

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The head of the North West Parks and Tourism Board has told Parliament that the thieves who stole 51 rhino horns from its guarded facility in June must have had intimate knowledge of its security system.

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Details of the ongoing investigation into the [theft of 51 rhino horns](#) worth R9-million from the Mahikeng head office of the North West Parks and Tourism Board (NWPTB) were revealed during a parliamentary oversight meeting on Wednesday, 2 August.

Presentations were made by both the North West parks board and the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (DPCI), known as the Hawks, to the Portfolio Committee on Environment, Forestry and Fisheries.

It was made clear that a sophisticated syndicate was behind the theft. The syndicate had intimate knowledge of the high-level security system in place, and it was clear that incompetence and corruption played an important role in the success of the operation.

The theft has rocked conservationists across the country. None of the horns has been recovered, and the investigation is ongoing. Board members have been told they are all possible suspects. So far, four arrests have been made, with a fifth suspect identified, but not yet arrested.

Read more in Daily Maverick: [Suspect in court after Hawks make breakthrough on theft of 51 rhino horns from North West Parks Board](#)

Thami Matshego, acting CEO of the North West parks board, said: “The crime scene area reveals that perpetrators were well informed of security measures on the premises since they directly targeted and de-activated all security early-warning systems on the building.”

Based on CCTV footage, the incident lasted for about one-and-a-half hours. The horns were in a tray to be profiled and fitted with transponders. About 10 of the horns had been fitted with transponders. Matshego said the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) was informed immediately.

“DFFE enforcement officials were notified on the same day of the theft of the rhino horn, and a DFFE official made contact with NWPTB to offer assistance if needed. The DFFE official immediately alerted colleagues at the border posts of the theft who activated the protocols at the border posts,” she said.

Matshego said that only highly sophisticated people who they knew and worked with could get through such a high-level security system at the stockpile facility.

She said the board was working closely with Hawks, SAPS and other security authorities to further the investigation, and that they had said more suspects would be arrested.

“We hope those people, especially those at the top of the chain of this criminal syndicate, are listed there. That is our main mission as the board,” she said.

The North West parks board vault is currently empty. All the horns have been moved and the parks board is working on improving its systems to ensure that stockpiles do not stay in one location for too long and are moved immediately, not stored.

Authorities outside the organisation are conducting a detailed security assessment because of the intimate knowledge the suspects seemingly had of the facility and its security systems.

Matshego said that when they, as members of the board, were interviewed, they were told: “All of us are suspects because it happened in our premises.”

The North West parks board is a state-owned entity within the provincial Department of Economic Development, Environment, Conservation and Tourism. It manages 15 protected areas, covering a total surface area of about 200,000ha. It manages four populations of white rhino and two populations of black rhino within its estate of protected areas.

However, the board’s term lapsed three months ago with a new board expected to be announced at the end of September.

In the recent past, the NWPB transferred all rhino stockpiles to national central vaults for safekeeping.

How did the theft take place?

Matshego explained that on Monday, 26 June, at about 6.05am, the senior manager of resource security was informed about a suspected burglary at the parks board’s head office in Mahikeng. Criminals broke into the premises and forcefully removed a safe in the office of the senior manager of resource security.

The suspects started by forcing open the aluminium door on the ground floor of the east wing of the building. They went to the first floor and deactivated the alarm at the stockpile vaults. They then removed the safe in the office of the senior security manager, in which the main vault’s key was kept. They disabled the CCTV cameras and managed to access the security rooms housing the main vault and other strongrooms.

Read more in Daily Maverick: [‘Kick in the gut’ – thieves escape with 51 rhino horns from North West Parks Board HQ](#)

“The premises of the North West Parks and Tourism Board head offices are patrolled by armed security guards, and according to their report, one guard was at the site, but didn’t see or hear anything out of the ordinary. The footage retrieved from the CCTV system shows two suspects wearing balaclavas. They entered the main vault and took approximately 51 rhino horns. These were packed inside the polypropylene bags,” Matshego said.

Previous break-ins

There have been two previous attempts to break into the facility, which has led to more stringent security measures. Without knowledge of these measures, it would have been nearly impossible to penetrate the North West parks board head office.

The first break-in happened in August 2014, when a group of nine men overpowered the security guards, broke into the storeroom area and blew open the strongroom with explosives. They couldn't get into the main vault, and only computers and small items were stolen. Security was then reinforced.

In September 2017, another attempt was made when robbers tried to break through the outside wall of the safe; the alarm was triggered and armed response reacted immediately. This led to the outside walls of the vault being further reinforced.

Update on the investigation

The Hawks' Albert Seabi said that an investigation team had been established. It gathered evidence and identified suspects allegedly involved in the commission of the offence.

Four suspects were arrested on charges of housebreaking and theft, illegal dealing of rhino horn and conspiracy, possession of stolen property, illegal possession of firearms, money laundering, corruption and racketeering.

The suspects are: Elias Manganda (40), Lindani Vernon Mthombeni (32), Lonjezo Kanjipiti (26), and Lefa Daniel Mankgaba (46).

Seabi revealed that another suspect had been identified but not yet arrested. The case was postponed to 14 August 2023 in the Mmabatho Magistrates' Court for further investigation. Mthombeni and Mankgaba were released on bail of R2,000 and R5,000 respectively. The other accused are still in custody.

“Wildlife trafficking is not purely a conservation and environmental management problem, but constitutes a highly sophisticated form of serious transnational organised crime that is, among other threats, also a threat to national security. It has been declared a priority crime by the DPCI,” Seabi said. **DM**