## Convicted rhino poacher blames syndicate bosses for being sentenced to 50 years



Dominic Mnisi, Ayanda Ngomani and Lwanzi Malambe were sentenced at the Skukuza Regional Court on Thursday. Picture: Mashudu Sadike

A convicted rhino poacher has blamed his syndicate bosses after receiving a 50-year jail term for illegal hunting in the Kruger National Park (KNP).

Dominic Mnisi, 36, Ayanda Ngomane, 31, and Lwazi Malambe, 31, were sentenced to 50, 21 and 33 years direct imprisonment by the Skukuza Regional Court on Thursday.

The trio were convicted by the same court in early June after being found guilty by the presiding magistrate Jan Ngobeni.

Mnisi and Malambe were arrested in January 2017 at Stols Nek after they were found in possession of a rifle, ammunition and four fresh rhino horns, which were later linked to two recently killed white rhino found near where they were apprehended.

However, they were granted bail and were later apprehended once again in possession of a rifle, ammunition, a knife and two rhino horns.

The three were convicted of trespassing, hunting rhinos, possession of an unlicensed firearm, conspiracy to commit a crime, possession of a firearm with the intention to commit a crime, possession of unlicensed ammunition and cruelty to animals, among others.

Speaking exclusively to *The Star* after they were sentenced, an irate Mnisi blamed syndicates saying that they had destroyed his life.

"It's syndicates that take us and destroy our lives. I was recruited into this by someone who promised me the world... He was saying we don't even have beds so we should work for him. I joined in and have been paid by going to jail for 50 years...

"They said to us that they were giving us jobs so that we could get out of the situation that we were in," Mnisi said.

He said he didn't know that things would end up this way.

Asked who the syndicate bosses were, Mnisi could not disclose their names out of fear of retaliation.

"We don't know these people's names. They find us by the corner or where we hang out and convince us, selling us a dummy... So we end up doing it.

"They offer R20 000 for one horn. I have never held R20 000 in cash and so to imagine having that money, you can't resist... I have not even received that money because I got arrested.

"They don't even visit us. We got caught the first time, and then they said that we should go back to try to get more horns... These people are not good people because we are young kids."

Mnisi called out to young people to not consider this crime, saying they should be careful of being lured to these crimes because the syndicates are roaming the streets freely to lure them.

During the court proceedings, the three took the stand to apologise to the court, saying they had been remorseful of their crimes while pleading with the court to be lenient when delivering their sentence.

However, the State, represented by advocate Lot Mgiba, said that the accused never showed any remorse throughout their crimes, labelling the KNP rangers as liars.

"The poaching of rhinos has reached crisis level. The only suitable sentence is direct imprisonment... And for a very long time," Mgiba said.

He said that this would deter other would-be poachers from the deed.

The poacher's lawyer, Moshe Nyathela, from Legal Aid, had pleaded with the court to be lenient in its sentencing because they had come from poor backgrounds.

"The court must not be angry with the accused because they were pressured into the crime... the fact that they live around the KNP made them see a chance to get some money out of it," Nyathela said.

However, reading out the sentences, Ngobeni noted the seriousness of their offences, saying the accused were not remorseful.

He said the trio did not know what the difference was between regret and remorse.

KNP spokesperson Ike Phaahla welcomed the sentencing.

"We are happy with the decision of the court to give them active sentences. It was appropriate and he took it to consider their personal circumstances but also considered the public good and the seriousness of the crime," Phaahla said.

## The Star

mashudu.sadike@inl.co.za