

AFRICA

Six Zimbabweans face multiple charges linked to rhino poaching

By **Adrienne Carlisle** - 12 May 2021



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Image: 123RF.COM

The rhino poaching trial of six Zimbabweans, four of whom are allegedly in South Africa illegally, will proceed in the high court sitting in Makhanda on Thursday.

Francis Chitiyo, 31, Trymore Chauke, 26, Micheck Chauke, 23, Simba Masinge, 23, Nhamo Muyambo, 28 and Abraham Moyane, 23, — all of whom live in East London — face some 38 charges related to the poaching of about eight rhino in the Eastern Cape between 2017 and 2018.

They have all pleaded not guilty to the charges.

The state's indictment describes the six men as a "team of hunters and smugglers" whom it accuses of acting in concert to "kill rhinos and steal rhino horn to supply and sell to the illicit black-market trade for personal gain".

The indictment alleges the men had illegally obtained firearms and ammunition and equipped themselves with tools — such as knives and axes — to remove and convey the stolen horn.

It said they acted as a team, travelling from East London to various scenes in vehicles owned by Francis Chitiyo and Muyambo.

“Some or all of them would surreptitiously enter through the perimeter fences or otherwise onto the various properties where rhinos were kept,” the indictment says.

“They used large calibre hunting rifles to shoot and kill the animals, before removing the horns with axes or other sharp tools.”

In the summary of substantial facts attached to the indictment, it is alleged that only Francis Chitiyo and Muyamob were in the country legally.

The state alleges they had illegally acquired a .375 rifle and silencer, along with multiple different cellular telephones and sim cards to communicate during the alleged crimes, to avoid detection of their movements afterwards.

Francis Chitiyo, Micheck Chauke, Muyamo and Moyane were arrested at Tarkastad in August 2017 travelling in a bakkie while in possession of an unlicensed .375 rifle and ammunition hidden in the boot compartment of the vehicle.

The rifle was seized by the police. The state claims that it only discovered after the men’s release that they could be linked to a poaching of a rhino in the Cradock district in July 2017

It alleges in the indictment that the group had subsequently obtained another .375 calibre rifle and killed seven more rhino in five poaching incidents before all six were arrested near Makhanda in July 2018.

On that occasion, the six were arrested in two vehicles, the one towing the other on the road between East London and Makhanda “where there are numerous game reserves housing populations of rhino”.

It is alleged that police discovered the hidden rifle and ammunition in the tailgate of the bakkie that was being towed. It also found two new axes, knives and several cellphones.

The men remain in custody pending their trial after bail was refused.

Senior state advocate Buks Coetzee, who specialises in rhino poaching and other environmental crimes, is prosecuting.

Attorney Viwe Mqeke is representing Francis Chitiyo and Trymore Chauke and Charles Stamper is acting for the remaining accused.

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