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/ LOCAL NEWS

Chinese fugitive arrested in UAE

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Don Makanyanga

ONE of the seven Chinese nationals who slipped out of the country while on bail after being arraigned on charges of money laundering and possession of more than 20 kilogrammes of rhino horns has been arrested by the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol) in the United Arab Emirates after spending over two years on the run.

Luck ran out for Zeng Denghui (21) when he was arrested in sensational fashion in Abu Dhabi in October, becoming the first member of the gang of seven to be nabbed by the international crime busting organisation.

He now awaits extradition back to Zimbabwe.

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Police national spokesperson Assistant Commissioner Paul Nyathi confirmed the arrest.

“We can confirm that on October 15, 2021, the Zimbabwe Republic Police received a message from the Interpol National Central Bureau, Abu Dhabi, advising on the arrest of Zeng Denghui.

“Now the necessary extradition processes are being effected through the Government systems,” he said.

Zeng along with his alleged accomplices Peicong Wang, Liu Cheng, Yu Xian, Long Zhu, Chen Xianfu, and Qiu Jinchang aged from 23 to 35, were arrested in Victoria Falls on December 23, 2018 after they were found in possession of 20,98kg of rhino horns worth an estimated US$1 million.

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They were charged with money laundering and possession of rhino horns in violation of the Money Laundering and Proceeds of Crime Act and the Wildlife and Parks Act respectively.

A Hwange magistrate presiding over their cases remanded them in custody for four months, before they were granted bail by Bulawayo High Court Judge Justice Maxwell Takuva on April 26, 2019.

The seven were ordered to pay $5 000 bail, restricted from travelling beyond a 10km radius from Victoria Falls without notifying authorities and to reside at 858 Aerodrome Road in the resort city until finalisation of their case.

Police sources told The Sunday Mail that sometime between their release from remand prison and September 2019, the seven made good their escape.

In what was an intricately planned escape, the seven, with the help of Bulawayo-based policeman Wonder

Tawanda Kwaramba, drove from Victoria Falls to Sango Border Post in eastern Zimbabwe, a journey of more than 900km, in a stolen car.

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From Sango Border Post, the gang was driven across south-central Mozambique to Maputo where they proceeded to the safety of a Chinese fishing boat that was due to sail them home.

Kwaramba was later charged with obstructing the course of justice.

Their escape came to light after they failed to turn-up for their routine bail appearance in September that year.

This prompted the police to notify Interpol.

Interpol immediately placed the seven on the Red Notice, joining over 7 600 other criminals wanted for committing offences ranging from terrorism, corruption, human trafficking and escaping lawful custody.

A Red Notice is a request to law enforcement agencies worldwide to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition, surrender, or similar legal action.

The notice is issued for fugitives wanted either for prosecution or to serve a sentence after judicial proceedings in the country issuing the request.

According to the Red Notice, the gang is wanted for being in, "possession or sell(ing) or otherwise disposing of any live specifically protected animal or the meat or trophy or any such animal.

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"Unlawfully acquiring, use or possess property knowing or suspecting at the time of receipt that such property is the proceeds of crime."

Charges

Court papers used to prosecute the gang in Victoria Falls show that on December 22, 2018, detectives from the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) Minerals, Flora and Fauna Unit (MFFU) in the resort city received information that house number 858 Aerodrome was a criminal haven for Chinese nationals suspected to be in possession of pieces of rhinoceros horns.

On the same day, the detectives applied for a warrant of search and seizure.

The following day, detectives proceeded to the house to carry out a search.

"The detectives started their search from a room which was at the far end of the sitting room whose door was open.

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"Accused 2 (Wang) indicated that the room was being occupied by accused 3 (Cheng).

"In that bedroom alleged to be occupied by accused 3, the detectives recovered one plastic bag close to the bathroom way on the floor.

"The plastic bag contained pieces of rhinoceros horns. A few centimetres away another plastic bag was found on top of a small cardboard box.

"The plastic bag also contained cut pieces of rhinoceros horns.

"In the same room, the detectives saw a plastic bag protruding from a bed base and they retrieved it.

"The plastic bag also contained cut pieces of rhinoceros horns.

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"Closer to the bed base, the detectives recovered some small packets each filled with cut pieces of rhinoceros horns neatly packed in a silver suitcase."

The detectives also recovered a portable digital scale on the floor.

"The large quantities and manner of packaging of some of the cut pieces of rhinoceros horns was in such a way that a concerted effort was made by the seven accused persons.

"The manner in which the house was being occupied, where the seven accused persons used the same sitting room, cooked and ate together, showed common purpose.

"Based on the above facts, the detectives arrested all the seven accused persons for illegally possessing pieces of rhinoceros horns."

Further investigations revealed that the seven had no formal business in Zimbabwe yet they were paying pay monthly rentals of US$1 500 for the premises which were paid for least two months in advance yet they had no income to match this expenditure.

ZimParks spokesperson Mr Tinashe Farawo said: "We are doing a lot of awareness and it seems like our judiciary officers are beginning to appreciate the importance of penalising rhino poachers in the country.

"That is why you see some people getting as much as 35 years imprisonment when it comes to poaching our rhinos."

An international manhunt for the rest of the gang continues.

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