

# Indonesian pangolin trafficking prosecution reveals police involvement — and impunity

- *Late last year, Indonesian investigators arrested four men for allegedly attempting to traffic nearly 1.2 metric tons of scales from critically endangered pangolins.*
- *Prosecutors in Asahan district, North Sumatra province, allege that the mastermind of the scheme was a police officer who removed the pangolin scales from a police warehouse used to store evidence and seized goods.*
- *But while the three other men arrested in the case — two soldiers and a civilian — are facing court-martial and trial, respectively, for their roles in the case, the police officer has so far avoided any charges and has even been promoted.*
- *Wildlife trade observers say the case highlights the apparent impunity of law enforcement officials involved in wildlife trafficking in Indonesia, a major hub for the illegal pangolin trade.*

ASAHAN, Indonesia – On Nov. 11, 2024, Alfi Simatupang, a police officer in Asahan district on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, was arrested along with two soldiers and a civilian for allegedly attempting to traffic nearly 1.2 metric tons of pangolin scales.

Since that bust, the civilian, Amir Simatupang, has gone on trial; the soldiers, Muhammad Yusuf Harahap and Rahmadani Syahputra, are undergoing a court-martial; while Alfi, the alleged mastermind of the trafficking plot, has not only avoided prosecution, but even been promoted.

This glaring disparity in the way the case is being prosecuted has highlighted once again the apparent impunity enjoyed by law enforcement officers accused of wildlife crimes in Indonesia, observers say.

“This is not the first case involving [law enforcement] officials,” Marison Guciano, co-founder of the nonprofit conservation NGO Flight Indonesia Foundation, said in response to the case. “There’s big money in the illegal wildlife business.”

The case came to light last November when a joint team of police, military police and environment ministry enforcement officers received a tip about a potential trade in pangolin scales. They first arrested Yusuf, one of the soldiers, who was found driving a pickup truck loaded with boxes containing a combined 320 kilograms (705 pounds) of pangolin scales.

The raid also netted the second soldier, Syahputra, along with Alfi and Amir, is alleged to be the middleman connecting the sellers to a buyer in Aceh province. A search of Yusuf’s home uncovered another 858 kg (1,892 lbs) of pangolin scales, for a total of nearly 1.2 metric tons.

Calculations by the environment ministry and the Bogor Institute of Agriculture (IPB), a top Indonesian university, found that the scales recovered by the operation indicated around 5,900 pangolins had been killed by poachers.



*Pangolin scales confiscated from the three officers and a civilian in Asahan district, North Sumatra province. Image by Ayat S. Karokaro/Mongabay Indonesia.*

Amir was taken into the environment ministry custody to be prosecuted in the district court. Yusuf and Syahputra were detained by the military police ahead of a court-martial. Alfi, meanwhile, was taken by police for an ethics hearing but not detained.

At both the court-martial and Amir's trial, it was revealed how Alfi was allegedly behind the whole trafficking attempt. Witnesses at both tribunals testified that Alfi had removed the pangolin scales from the Asahan district police's evidence warehouse, asking Yusuf, an acquaintance, to take them in his truck and store them temporarily near his house.

Weeks later, the court-martial and the trial heard, Yusuf asked Alfi when he planned to return the scales to the warehouse, at which point Alfi proposed selling them instead. He allegedly named a price of 600,000 rupiah per kilo (\$36/kg, or \$16/lb), of which Yusuf and Syahputra would get a third. Alfi then allegedly got into contact with Amir, who connected him with a prospective buyer in Aceh province. It was during the men's alleged attempt to smuggle a first batch of the scales to Aceh that they were busted on Nov. 11.

When Alfi testified at Amir's trial on April 28, the [presiding judge questioned why](#), despite Yusuf and Syahputra's prior testimony about his role in the case, Alfi still hadn't been charged yet.

"Based on the previous witness testimony and the facts that have been revealed, we see the involvement of [Alfi] in this case and we recommend that prosecutors charge the witness [Alfi] and carry out further investigation," Judge Yanti Suryani said.

At the separate court-martial of the two soldiers, it was also revealed that not only had Alfi not been charged, but [he had been promoted](#) by the Asahan district police.



Amir Simatupang, orange shirt, at a hearing in the pangolin scale trafficking case. Image by Ayat S. Karokaro/Mongabay Indonesia.

## World's most-trafficked mammal

The fast-disappearing Sunda pangolin (*Manis javanica*) is native to 10 countries in Southeast Asia, and is considered critically endangered on the [IUCN Red List](#). Globally, all eight species of pangolin are listed under Appendix I of CITES, the international wildlife trade convention, meaning commercial trade in the animals is prohibited.

Pangolins are the only mammal entirely clad in scales, which are made from the same protein, keratin, as human hair and nails. That chainmail protection offers pangolins robust defense in nature, but the scales are their greatest vulnerability to criminals in a global wildlife trade estimated at up to \$23 billion per year.

The scales are particularly sought after in China and Vietnam, where some medical practitioners erroneously attribute to them anti-inflammatory and other made-up health benefits.

In 2020, China removed pangolin scales from its national drug formulary, but several traditional medicines continue to list the scales as an ingredient. Wildlife crime experts say this likely supports a [criminal supply chain run through Hong Kong and a handful of cities in China](#).

From October this year, China will no longer include in its national formulary the traditional medicine Guilingji, which contains pangolin scale.



*Scales of the pangolin, the world's most trafficked mammal. Image by Junaidi Hanafiah/Mongabay Indonesia.*

## Soldiers of fortune

The Asahan case isn't the first time Indonesian officials have been shown to be involved in pangolin trafficking.

In 2016, a soldier was arrested while driving through Medan, North Sumatra province, with [eight caged pangolins](#) in the back of his car. The nation's conservation agency said at the time that the animals were together worth up to 40 million rupiah, close to \$3,000 at the exchange rate at the time.

This past April, [prosecutors appealed](#) a North Sumatra court's acquittal of the alleged mastermind behind a 2023 attempt to smuggle 295 kg (650 lbs) of pangolin scales to Malaysia, for which a ship captain has already been sentenced to prison time.

Marison, the veteran countertrafficker, said the temptation to get into the trade can be irresistible. "The motive to make big money is what ultimately means almost all the relevant agencies are infiltrated by the illegal wildlife trade, a network that works in a very smart and sophisticated way."

In April, a court in North Sumatra province [sentenced a man to five years in prison](#) for the killing of a critically endangered Sumatran tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*).

Marison said Aceh, North Sumatra and Riau provinces were a "red zone" for wildlife crime. Much of the illegal export of wildlife, at least in Sumatra, is carried out through these three contiguous provinces, he added.

**Banner image:** The fast-disappearing Sunda pangolin (*Manis javanica*) is native to 10 countries in Southeast Asia, and is considered critically endangered on the IUCN Red List. Image by Frendi Apen Irawan via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (CC BY-SA 4.0).

*This story was first published [here](#) and [here](#) in Indonesian on March 20 and April 22, 2025.*

