

# ‘Shock and alarm’ as Malawi pardons wildlife trafficker Lin Yunhua

LILONGWE — Malawi’s President Lazarus Chakwera has granted a presidential pardon to Lin Yunhua, a Chinese national sentenced to 14 years in prison for wildlife trafficking. Lin was [among 37 inmates](#) who received a presidential pardon as part of Malawi’s 61st independence anniversary celebrations on July 6. Conservationists have since expressed their disappointment, warning that Lin’s pardon might demotivate frontline officers working to protect Malawi’s wildlife.

“The news came as a shock to some of us,” Brighton Kumchedwa, director of Malawi’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife, told Mongabay by phone. “For us in the conservation sector, we didn’t expect a high-profile wildlife criminal of his caliber to be set free like that.”

While authorities have [not published the pardon list](#), news of Lin’s [impending pardon](#) started spreading as early as [April this year](#). Authorities at the time described the possibility as [speculation](#), but more recently British newspaper [The Telegraph](#) reported that prison officials familiar with the pardon list confirmed that both Lin and his wife, Qin Hua Zhang, were included.

Malawian authorities arrested Lin, Zhang and 12 other members of a notorious wildlife crime syndicate that operated across Southern Africa, in 2019. At the time, Lin and Zhang were found in possession of elephant tusks, hippopotamus teeth, pangolin scales and rhino horns, and their arrest was welcomed by local and international civil society, some [describing](#) it as “the destruction of the Lin-Zhang gang.” Zhang was sentenced to 11 years in prison in 2020; Lin [received a 14-year sentence](#) in 2021.

Wildlife and environmental campaigners say pardoning the pair sets a bad precedent for the country’s efforts to combat wildlife crimes, undermining public trust in the justice system.

“We are alarmed by the release of a major wildlife trafficker,” Patricio Ndadzela, country director for Malawi and Zambia at the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), said in a [statement](#). “This sends the wrong signal to criminal networks and could seriously impact morale among those on the frontlines of conservation.”

While Zhang has reportedly left the country, Lin remains remanded on [charges](#) of bribing a prison official and a judge, offenses he allegedly committed while incarcerated.

Officials said the presidential pardons were awarded in accordance with Malawian laws. In a statement, secretary for homeland security, Steve Kayuni, [said](#) the pardons were limited to prisoners who had demonstrated good conduct and met the prescribed guidelines, and that the president’s decision was a “selective exercise” of clemency.

Moses Chabuka, executive director of the NGO Neno Active Youth in Development (NAYODE), told Mongabay by phone that Lin and Zhang’s pardons may have been a diplomatic concession to China.

“From an international relations perspective, the move may reflect Malawi’s desire to strengthen its diplomatic ties with China, which has been a significant investor in various sectors within the country,” Chabuka said.

**Banner image:** Yunhua Lin, left, at the court in Malawi in 2021. Image courtesy of Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA).

