

MINISTER GEORGE WELCOMES 30-YEAR SENTENCE FOR MOZAMBIKAN RHINO POACHER

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Dr Dion George, the Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, welcomes the sentencing of Silas Mathebula, a 38-year-old Mozambican national, to 30 years in prison by the Skukuza Regional Court for his role in the illegal killing of three rhinos and related offences in the Kruger National Park in 2019.

The Minister views this significant sentence as a clear indication that poaching and wildlife crime will not be tolerated in South Africa, and that those who threaten the nation's natural heritage will face the full might of the law.

The Minister notes that Mathebula's conviction on multiple charges including trespassing, conspiracy to commit a crime, killing three rhinos, and possession of prohibited and unlicensed firearms, which reflects the seriousness of his actions.

He commends the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) for presenting compelling evidence, including DNA analysis linking the seized rhino horns to poached carcasses and ballistic evidence tying the crime to the firearm in the suspects' possession, which demonstrates the professionalism and dedication of South Africa's law enforcement agencies and rangers in combating wildlife crime.

Dr George highlights that the incident, which occurred on 23 November, 2019, in the Malelane Section of Kruger National Park, serves as a stark reminder of the ongoing threat posed by poaching syndicates to South Africa's biodiversity and iconic species. He acknowledges the bravery and vigilance of the rangers who arrested Mathebula and his accomplices after discovering a rifle, six fresh rhino horns, and ammunition in their vehicle, emphasising their critical role in protecting the country's natural heritage.

While Dr George praises the judiciary for delivering justice in this case, he expresses deep concern about the broader scourge of poaching. He stresses that the illegal killing of rhinos and other endangered species undermines conservation efforts and has devastating long-term consequences for ecosystems, tourism, and the livelihoods of communities dependent on these natural resources.

The Minister also welcomes the declaration of Mathebula as unfit to possess a firearm under the Firearms Control Act, viewing it as a further step to ensure that perpetrators of such crimes are prevented from continuing their illegal activities.

Under Dr George's leadership, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment reaffirms its unwavering commitment to protecting South Africa's wildlife and biodiversity.

The Minister pledges to continue working closely with the NPA, the South African Police Service, SANParks, and other partners to strengthen anti-poaching initiatives, enhance cross-border collaboration with neighbouring countries, and ensure that offenders are brought to justice.

He regards this sentence as a victory not only for the rhinos of Kruger National Park but also for future generations who deserve to inherit a world rich in biodiversity.

Dr George calls on all South Africans and international partners to join the Department in the fight against wildlife crime. He emphasises that collective action is essential to protect South Africa's natural heritage and ensure that those who seek to exploit it face the consequences of their actions.

