

Hawks stop alleged Vietnamese wildlife trafficker from fleeing SA justice

A controversial Vietnamese national was arrested trying to flee South Africa while on wildlife trafficking charges. Huy Bao Tran is linked to the ‘staged’ theft of 98 rhino horns and a vast global syndicate.

A Vietnamese national wanted in connection with a high-profile rhino horn trafficking operation was arrested at Cape Town International Airport on Tuesday, 24 February, as he was about to board a flight to Singapore with his family.

The warrant for the arrest of Huy Bao Tran (54) was issued after investigators linked him to the case of two Nigerian nationals who were arrested in early December for possession of 17 rhino horns and 26.2kg of lion and tiger bones at a storage facility in Kempton Park.

The case gained international attention last year after Singapore airport authorities announced in November that they had seized two massive shipments of rhino horns and predator skulls and carcasses that originated in South Africa.



Singapore authorities perform forensic identification procedures on a predator's carcass seized from a shipment at the Changi International Airport. (Photo: Singapore Police Force)

Hawks spokesperson Colonel Katlego Mogale said investigations had tied the 17 rhino horns recovered from the storage facility on 1 December 2025 to 98 rhino horns reported stolen a week later in a “staged” armed robbery at Voi Game Lodge in Hartbeesfontein, North West. Further investigations revealed that the horns belonged to a Vietnamese national who was suspiciously not present at the farm when the alleged robbery occurred.

A white Toyota Prado, suspected to have been used in the staged robbery, was later traced to Woodhill Golf Estate in Pretoria. The vehicle was seized, and dusted and swept for incriminating evidence

It is believed that DNA samples taken from the vehicle and from the rhino horns seized in Kempton Park were submitted to the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory at the University of Pretoria for DNA

profiling, the results of which are expected to be produced as evidence when Huy appears in court again next week.

He made his initial appearance in the Belville Regional Court on Wednesday, 25 February.



Huy Bao Tran at DKC Trading's warehouse in Montague Gardens, Cape Town. (Photo: Facebook / Ben Tran)

Huy was ordered held in custody and his case transferred to Kempton Park Magistrates' Court, where he will appear next week alongside co-accused Tunji Olanrewaju Koyi (35) and Koyode Adukunle Ongundele (43). They were arrested on 1 December 2025 on charges of possessing rhino horns and predator bones without a permit and have been held in custody since their first appearance on 3 December.

Illegal consignment

The arrests were the result of a high-stakes “controlled delivery” orchestrated by the Hawks, SARS and the Border Management Authority. The operation began in November after Singaporean officials flagged a suspicious shipment and alerted their South African counterparts.

This followed an earlier, record-breaking seizure at Changi Airport, where authorities intercepted 35.7kg of rhino horn destined for Laos — the largest haul in Singapore's history. While the cargo was labelled as “furniture fittings”, an inspection by Singapore airport staff revealed a grim reality: 20 rhino horns and 150kg of predator parts, including teeth and claws. The shipment was bound for Vientiane, a notorious hub for illegal wildlife trafficking on the Mekong River. Investigators now suspect these remains were smuggled from Voi Lodge just before the report of a “staged robbery” was filed.

Huy manages the interests of the Vietnamese-owned DKC Trading Company's operations in South Africa, which include the Voi Game Lodge and DKC Furniture, an import-export company that sells outdoor wooden furniture.

In 2015, Huy was part of a plan to source and ship as many as 100 rhinos to the newly established Vin Pearl Safari Park on Phu Quoc island, off the coast of Vietnam.



Huy Bao Tran embarking on a flight from Johannesburg to Vietnam in 2015. (Photo: Facebook / Ben Tran)

Authorities from South Africa's Department of the Environment reviewed and refused the permit applications.

Five rhinos belonging to Voi Game Lodge were found shot to death in a quarantine facility at Bona Bona Game Lodge near Wolmaranstad in the early hours of Christmas Day. Their horns had been

hacked off.

Voi Game Lodge is owned by Chu Dang Khoa, aka Michael Chu, aka the Diamond King, a shadowy Vietnamese figure in the illegal world of rhino horn and tiger bone trafficking. His family has interests in oil tankers and petroleum distribution outlets in Vietnam, and is known to be well-connected to the Vietnamese Communist Party.



Voi Game Lodge and DKC Trading owner Chu Dang Khoa. (Photo: Facebook)

According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and other wildlife protection sources:

- In 2011, Chu was arrested and convicted for the illegal possession of five rhino horns.
- He was fined R40,000 (about \$3,000 at the time) and deported from South Africa.
- In Vietnam, he has been described as a “diamond tycoon” and “notorious playboy” known for trafficking rhino horns, ivory and diamonds, with close ties to criminal networks in South Africa.

A former head of the Stock Theft and Endangered Species Unit, Lieutenant Colonel Steve Roets, said there was ample evidence to show that the majority of rhino horn thefts in South Africa “are all staged burglaries. Rhino horns are supposed to be stored in a locked, immobile safe, not in some cupboard, coffee chest or stashed in a ceiling somewhere.

“Provincial nature conservation authorities and the national department are responsible for auditing these stockpiles. Questions need to be asked about how often and how thoroughly they are doing their due diligence,” said Roets. **DM**