

Where is Zimbabwe's cyanide queen? Li Song, wanted over wildlife poisoning, skips bail



Police are keeping mum about the extradition of Li Song, wanted in connection with the use of poison in the illegal wildlife trade.

Zimbabwe's national police force appears reluctant to pursue Li Song, a Chinese citizen allegedly at the centre of what wildlife activists say is a high-powered poaching network that uses cyanide to kill animals in the country's game reserves.

Li was arrested in 2024 by the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (Zacc) for allegedly importing large quantities of cyanide fraudulently and storing the toxic substance in unsafe locations.

But Li skipped bail and is believed to have fled the country to evade prosecution.

According to court records, in August 2024 Harare magistrate Dennis Mangosi issued a warrant for her arrest after Li failed to appear in court. The case involves alleged misrepresentation to the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority over the importation of sodium cyanide, a salt of cyanide that turns into a toxic gas when it interacts with water.

In the wake of her alleged escape, wildlife conservationists are asking hard questions: how did a high-profile foreign citizen, wanted by the courts, manage to skip the country undetected? Why are the police dragging their feet in updating the public on law enforcement efforts? And most damning of all: why have no visible efforts been made to pursue her extradition?

In a telephone interview, National Prosecution Authority of Zimbabwe spokesperson Angeline Munyeriwa said: "The docket for Li is now in the hands of the police. We forwarded the warrant of arrest to the police for action. Our role is to prosecute only."

Despite concerted efforts to obtain an update on progress made in executing Li's warrant of arrest, police spokesperson, Commissioner Paul Nyathi, failed to respond to questions about whether she had fled the country, whether the Zimbabwe Republic Police has engaged Interpol or other international agencies about the case, and whether there are broader efforts by law enforcement to track and prevent illegal importation of hazardous chemicals used in poaching activities.

The inquiries, first submitted on 31 March, were acknowledged by officers in Nyathi's office, who repeatedly assured that a formal response would be forthcoming, but this was not done by the time of publication. The prolonged silence from the police raised serious concerns among commentators that law enforcement agencies may be deliberately shielding the fugitive Li from facing justice.



An undated photograph of Li Song, who is wanted by authorities in connection with the illegal importation of cyanide that has been used to poison wildlife in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe. (Photo: Supplied)

Communications manager at Zacc, Simiso Mlevu, also did not respond to questions submitted in late April about the police's apparent reluctance to pursue the matter. Considering the unit – a constitutional body formally established in 2013 whose functions include investigation, prosecution and punishment of corruption and other criminal conduct – was responsible for Li's arrest, this reporter sought clarification on whether it has the authority to execute a warrant of arrest independently, and whether it had engaged Interpol or other relevant law enforcement bodies.

Official protection

Li was born on 20 January 1972 in Henan province, central China. She arrived in Zimbabwe in 2003. She is believed to be linked to top government officials who allegedly provide her with protection against the litany of cases she faces in a country ridden with corruption. In its 2024 corruption index survey, Transparency International ranked Zimbabwe 158th out of 180 countries, making it one of the world's most corrupt countries.

Li reportedly arrived in Zimbabwe under modest circumstances and worked as an official interpreter for a Chinese construction company, China First. The company had numerous contracts in the country.

According to sources who used to be close to her, Li would claim that her father was a high-ranking general in the Chinese army, a powerful connection that she said gave her unusual leverage and access.

A few years later, Li bought China First after it had gone under the hammer. The interpreter had transformed into a businesswoman acquiring various properties, including upmarket houses in Beijing and Henan.

She is said to have started frequenting Sammy Levy's Village, an upmarket mall in the capital, Harare, often patronised by socialites, businesspeople and diplomats. She stayed in the same neighbourhood at 82 Piers Road with her son, according to sources.

"Li used to frequent Sammy Levy Village gym and the Golden Peacock Restaurant in Borrowdale where she networked with ease. She would at times be accompanied by government officials and she became a centre of attraction," said a source privy to her lifestyle who asked not to be named for security reasons.

Cyanide case

The 2024 cyanide case involved DGL9 Investments Pvt Ltd, a mining company based in Inyathi in Zimbabwe's Matabeleland North province. Li is a former director of the company and her co-accused, Bernadette Mukuku, is a former employee.

According to state papers, Li and Mukuku falsely represented to the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority that a consignment of sodium cyanide and hydrated lime they imported from Mauritius was conducted by the company, whereas it was done in their personal capacity. This enabled them to avoid paying customs duty of \$40,000.



A sign at the entrance to Hwange National Park on 5 April 2025. (Photo: Pamenus Tuso / SA | AJP)

The case was initially heard at Bulawayo Magistrates' Courts – case number BCR05/03/24 – before it was transferred to Harare in unclear circumstances.

Cyanide poisoning has been a significant threat to elephants in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe's biggest nature reserve with an estimated 50,000 elephants.

In 2013, poachers killed more than 300 elephants by poisoning salt and water pans with the lethal chemical. Subsequent incidents have continued, with 14 elephants poisoned in three separate incidents within the park and nearby Deka Safari area.

In another suspected case of poaching, three lions were found dead in the national park in October 2024.

Conservationists warned that cyanide use leads to devastating ripple effects throughout the ecosystem. Scavengers like hyenas and vultures often die after feeding on poisoned carcasses, setting off a silent collapse of biodiversity.

Powerful individuals

Elizabeth Valerio, a Hwange-based conservationist and leader of the opposition United Zimbabwe Alliance, recalled how trains used to stop randomly along the railway line in the national park to pick up ivory. She suspects that the ivory came from elephants killed through cyanide poisoning, and that the scheme had the backing of powerful individuals.

“Cyanide poisoning has been going on for over a decade. Some of these activities had far higher authorities behind them,” she said.

“The use of poison in illegal wildlife trade is always a concern because not only is it a silent and effective way of killing animals, but the knock-on effects within the ecosystem are large,” said Nathan Webb of the Wildlife Conservation Coalition, an association of organisations whose mandate is to provide a collective and united voice for conservation in northwestern Matebeleland.

Proposed changes contained in the Wildlife and Parks Amendment Bill will include punishment for poachers who use poisons, Webb said. “This is not something that has previously had a charge or a penalty. The biggest deterrent has got to be the penalties and fines and the punishment that people get when caught with such issues,” he said.

Sources in the wildlife industry say Li was also allegedly involved in the controversial export of 100 elephant calves from Zimbabwe to China in 2017 and that she masquerades as a close associate of the late president Robert Mugabe’s family.

Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority spokesperson Tinashe Farawo was reluctant to comment on these claims. “The issue of Li Song is a matter before the courts and we cannot be seen to be commenting on issues before the courts,” he said.

He however confirmed that between 2018 and 2019 Zimbabwe exported elephants to China. “The last time we exported elephants was in fulfilment of a trade agreement between the two countries,” he said.

Inquiries sent in mid-April to Li via email were ignored. Questions included whether she intended presenting herself to the authorities in connection with case number BCR05/03/24, whether she was aware of the warrant of arrest issued against her, and whether she wanted to comment on the allegations against her.

Serious allegations

Li has faced a series of serious allegations beyond wildlife crimes, including fraud, forgery, theft of trust property, money laundering and even attempted murder. Despite the gravity of the accusations, they have not been pursued by authorities.

Initiated by her ex-boyfriend and former Italian business partner, Francesco Marconati, they follow her removal as director of Eagle Italian Shoes Pvt Ltd and Eagle Italian Leather Pvt Ltd in October 2021. Marconati filed a case in November 2021 accusing Li of the unlawful and forced sale of shares in the two companies.





An undated photograph of Francesco Marconati, Li Song's former boyfriend and business partner, currently involved in a series of contentious legal disputes with Li. (Photo: Supplied)

In May 2022 he opened another fraud and forgery case at Bulawayo Central Police Station, accusing Li of forging an invoice from South African chemical supplier Cure Chem Investments. The case was later moved to Harare after no action was taken by the Bulawayo police.

She has also been accused of illegally transferring more than \$809,000 from Eagle Italian Shoes and other Marconati-linked companies to offshore entities. Funds were reportedly moved through Ecobank Zimbabwe to a Mauritius Commercial Bank account. The matter was also reported to the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe.

Despite the compilation of a docket in April 2024, no prosecution has begun. Marconati, through his legal team, has lodged complaints with the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission, the Commissioner General of Police and the Prosecutor General. On 17 May 2024, he wrote to the then police commissioner, General Godwin Matanga, expressing frustration over delays and the handling of the cases.

Earlier, in January 2024, Marconati also wrote to Prosecutor General Loice Matanda Moyo, requesting a meeting to discuss evidence that Li used her Mauritius-based company, Jacaranda, to siphon large sums from Zimbabwe. He accused her of breaching trust and covering her tracks with help from unnamed individuals, vowing continued efforts to recover the lost assets. **DM**

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