

Chinese ivory syndicates worsen Zimbabwe's illicit financial flows

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By The Zimbabwean

The 18-year prison sentence handed to Chinese national Cong Yangzhong in late 2025 cast fresh light and exposed the scale of illicit financial flows fueling wildlife crime in Zimbabwe.

Arrested in Harare on July 16, 2025, the 47-year-old was found in possession of three rhino horns and four pieces of raw ivory with a combined street value exceeding US\$246 000.

While Cong's case stood out because of the quantities of ivory involved, conservationists said such matters are becoming a permanent feature in courts around Zimbabwe.

In February 2025, two Chinese nationals, Lin Wang and Fux Wang, appeared at the Harare magistrates court after they were caught at the Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport in Harare trying to smuggle out of the country rhino horns worth a combined US\$480 000.

In a separate case, Lin and Fux were caught by undercover detectives while trying to make arrangements to smuggle rhino horns worth US\$120 000 with an agent in Harare's Alexandra Park.

Li Song, a Chinese national allegedly at the centre of a poaching network in Zimbabwe for many years during the Robert Mugabe years, went under the radar in 2024 after she was arrested for allegedly importing large quantities of cyanide and storing it in unsafe locations.

Cyanide was once a weapon of choice for poachers who killed hundreds of elephants at the Hwange National Park for their ivory.

Li is rumoured to have escaped to her country after a Harare magistrate issued a warrant of arrest against her two years ago for skipping trial.

While the National Prosecuting Authority of Zimbabwe (NPAZ) usually hails the arrests of the Chinese nationals as a signal that the fight against wildlife crimes is intensifying, conservationists

said the cases were only a tip of the iceberg.

East Asian syndicates and hidden financial flows

Conservationists revealed the increasing number of Chinese nationals being arrested during ivory seizures was proof that syndicates from East Asia have become the main challenge in the fight against illegal wildlife trade in Zimbabwe, leading to illicit financial flows.

Lack of detailed investigations after the seizures has prevented the syndicates from being unmasked. They remain untouched, the conservationists said.

The foreign syndicates allegedly connive with corrupt officials to smuggle ivory from elephants mainly poached from Matabeleland North's major wildlife reserves that include the Hwange National Park.

At least 30 000 elephants are killed across Africa every year for their tusks, which frequently end up in Chinese and Vietnamese markets.

Zimbabwe has the second-largest elephant population in the world after Botswana and holds an estimated 120 metric tonnes of stockpiled ivory, accumulated under a global trade ban intended to protect endangered species.

Zimbabwe, alongside Botswana and Namibia, has lobbied for the lifting of the ban, arguing that controlled sales would undercut black markets and generate funds for conservation.

For years, Zimbabwe's elephant population has been under siege from ivory poachers amid the growing influence of the Chinese population in the country.

China has become the world's largest ivory market and organised criminal syndicates from that country have been identified as the key drivers of ivory trafficking from Zimbabwe.

Investigations that involved tracking criminal prosecutions in Matabeleland North, interviews with conservationists and reviewing reports on wildlife crimes, showed Chinese syndicates were behind illicit financial flows from illegal ivory trade.

According to the Wildlife Justice Commission (2020), a kilogramme of raw ivory fetches between US\$75 and US\$85 on southern African black markets, compared to as much as US\$400 in China and Vietnam.

The Organised Crime Index 2023 described "wildlife trafficking as prevalent in Zimbabwe, particularly for ivory and rhino horns."

"Chinese transnational organised criminal groups are involved in this crime in the country," the report said.

In 2025 the same report said "fauna crimes are highly consolidated, with well-organised poaching networks engaged in the illegal trade of ivory and rhino horns."

"Corruption among state-embedded actors enables traffickers to operate with little resistance," the report added.

"The demand for wildlife products primarily originates from Asia, Chinese nationals reportedly playing a significant role in the market."

These smuggling routes often overlap with gold, arms and drug trafficking pipelines, complicating surveillance and enforcement.

Investigators found that routes through Matabeleland North, Hwange, Binga and Lupane link to trucking corridors feeding into South Africa, where illicit shipments are then sent to East Asian

markets.

Layers of a poaching syndicate

Amos Gwema, a wildlife law enforcement specialist with over two decades of experience, said the foreign poaching syndicates had a hierarchy that started with villagers at the base, followed by local syndicate leaders, city-based consolidators, and regional facilitators and led by international masterminds.

Gwema, also author of the book, *Safeguarding Wildlife – A Manual for Investigation, Enforcement and Conservation*, said poor villagers form the base of the triangle, often bearing the brunt of law enforcement efforts.

“They are identified, arrested, and charged with possession or dealing in wildlife products, making it difficult to connect them to higher-level operatives,” he said.

“In some cases, they are shot while poaching, and law enforcement celebrates these incidents. Rarely do efforts go beyond this level to investigate further, largely due to the legal challenges in linking them to the broader syndicate.”

A layer above the poachers are local syndicate leaders who are the middlemen, collecting ivory and wildlife products from the villagers.

Gwema said these individuals were trusted by buyers and received funds to purchase ivory, often at significantly lower prices of between US\$20 to US\$40 per kilogramme compared to US\$100 per kg.

“They don’t engage in poaching directly, instead waiting for Level 1 operatives to bring products to them, often outside the park or poaching area,” he said.

City-based consolidators are the next layer operating from urban areas, receiving and consolidating products from Level 2 collectors.

They are typically foreigners residing in the country, or locals who have earned the trust of local syndicate leaders.

They facilitate the transportation of ivory and other products out of the country, dealing only with trusted local syndicate leaders.

Gwema said the city-based consolidators were followed by individuals that oversee regional operations, leveraging connections to facilitate transportation and logistics for the illicit trade.

“They operate from regional hubs, which can be countries where animals are poached, such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, or South Africa,” he added.

“They are challenging for law enforcement to reach, making them a crucial part of the syndicate’s structure. At the apex of the syndicate, these individuals orchestrate the entire operation and reap the greatest benefits. They are based in consumer markets and are the hardest to apprehend, making them the elusive drivers of the illicit wildlife trade.”

Financial intelligence flags wildlife crime

A common feature of Zimbabwe’s Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) in the past few years is the increasing incidence of illicit financial flows linked to environment crimes such as the smuggling of ivory.

“Environmental-crime-related financial activity is rising sharply,” noted the FIU’s 2024 report.

“The jump from 212 Suspicious Transaction Reports (STRs) in 2022 to an average of 55 per month

in early 2023 signals that criminal networks are increasingly using formal financial channels."

The FIU said suspicious transaction reports associated with illegal wildlife trade dominated environmental crime categories, followed by illegal gold mining and timber smuggling.

Matabeleland North, Mashonaland West and Masvingo were identified as the hotspots for ivory poaching.

Poaching hotspots are areas with elephant populations, such as Hwange, Sebungwe, Northern regions and Gonarezhou.

Smugglers move ivory through porous borders, like the Zambezi River, or unmanned land border lines, conservationists who spoke on condition of anonymity said.

The FIU said it now possessed the capacity to "trace cross-border wire transfers, identify shell-company structures, and coordinate arrests with law-enforcement partners (Interpol, ZimParks, NPA)."

Civil society raises alarm

Farai Maguwu, Director of the Centre for Natural Resource Governance, said Chinese nationals dominated the number of foreigners caught trying to smuggle ivory out of Zimbabwe, pointing to entrenched criminal syndicates operating in the country.

"If you do a simple Google search, you will find that Chinese nationals have been arrested from time to time in Zimbabwe with ivory and rhino horn," Maguwu said.

"There's also international research that was done which implicated some powerful Zimbabweans as well in poaching.

'So the Chinese normally work with locals when they do these things, but this is something that we must really be concerned about because it's part of transnational organised crime.

"The shipment of ivory from Zimbabwe to whatever destination shows that there is a well-coordinated criminal syndicate involved in poaching in this country."

Muguwu, whose organisation does research and advocacy aimed at promoting citizen participation, said their grassroots monitors in ivory poaching hotspots such as Hwange often recorded suspicious activities by Chinese nationals.

"As you know a few years ago Chinese nationals were caught with ivory in Zimbabwe and were granted bail," he said.

"Predictably, they fled the country while on bail. In a normal situation, when you are arrested in a foreign land for such a serious crime.

"So the question is: how many such cases go unnoticed? Are those arrested only the tip of the iceberg?"

Nkosikhona Sibanda, Director at the Centre for Environment and Corporate Accountability, said there were allegations that some Chinese nationals employed around Hwange were involved in poaching activities.

A number of Chinese coal mines have been established in Hwange since President Emmerson Mnangagwa came into power in 2017.

In 2020 the government was forced to ban all mining in national parks after furore greeted the granting of coal mining exploration to Chinese-owned Afrochine Energy and Zhongxin Coal Mining.

Conservationists, who opposed the attempts to open the mines inside Zimbabwe's biggest game reserve said the granting of the licenses would result in irreparable harm to the fragile ecosystem.

"Based on our interactions with workers employed by Chinese mining companies, we have gathered that there are activities taking place in and around Hwange that appear to be illegal, and we are still trying to establish the full facts," Sibanda said.

"Many of these activities seem to be linked to poaching and the trafficking of ivory out of Zimbabwe, particularly from areas around Hwange National Park.

"There has been an influx of Chinese nationals into Hwange, most of whom are presented as mine workers employed by Chinese-owned mining operations in the area."

He said most of the Chinese nationals had access to guns that their employers claim are for security reasons, but some of them end up being used for poaching.

"We have seen ordinary citizens sentenced to seven, eight, 10 or even 15 years in prison for being found in possession of wildlife products without licences," Sibanda said.

"However, we have not seen major convictions involving Chinese nationals, despite a number of arrests that have been publicly reported by the Zimbabwe Republic Police.

"This raises questions about whether wildlife crimes are being treated differently based on a person's nationality or skin colour."

Silence from authorities

Zimparks spokesperson, Tamirirahe Mudzingwa, requested questions in writing when he was asked to comment on the involvement of Chinese nationals in poaching activities, but did not respond for over a month.

Zimbabwe lost 300 elephants at the Hwange National Park in 2013 where poachers used cyanide poisoning in an incident that drew global attention to the poaching problem.