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**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**DOWNWARD TREND IN RHINO POACHING IS ENCOURAGING SAYS MINISTER GEORGE**

**06 March 2025**

Wildlife Trafficking remains a significant global issue that requires an intense and co-ordinated global endeavour if we are to succeed in disrupting the criminal networks. Having started off 2025 by attending a Ranger course at the Southern African Wildlife College, I have gained a better understanding of the scourge of poaching and the difficult work of the rangers in the frontline.

As we intensify the fight against wildlife poaching, it is encouraging to see that the work of the rangers, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, and other key role players is steadily gaining momentum.

Today, I present the 2024 rhino poaching statistics, where we continue a downward trend.

From January to December 2024, 420 rhinos were poached in South Africa, with 320 being killed on state properties and 100 on privately owned parks, reserves or farms. This was a decrease (of 79) in comparison to 499 rhinos poached in 2023.

The hardest hit province continues to be KwaZulu-Natal that lost 232 rhinos; however, this is a notable decline from the 325 that were lost in 2023. The significant reduction can largely be attributed to the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife Dehorning Programme, that was implemented in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park from April to October 2024. The World Wide Fund for Nature funded programme had an immediate impact, with monthly poaching numbers dropping from 35 in April to fewer than 10 per month between May and September 2024.

In October, however, poaching syndicates adapted their tactics and began targeting dehorned rhinos, leading to a sudden spike in poaching incidents in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park and in that month alone, the province lost 27 rhinos. Fortunately, the provincial anti-rhino poaching team responded swiftly, intercepting the new syndicate and preventing further losses. The considerable efforts resulted in the province ultimately achieving a 67% decline in rhino poaching over the eight months.

Kruger National Park reported a total of 88 poached rhino for 2024.  This is ten animals more than the 78 that were reported for Kruger National Park during the same period in 2023.  Up until the end of November 2024, rhino losses reported in the Kruger National Park stood at 67, but a significant escalation in rhino poaching activities was experienced during December 2024 and this has continued into January 2025.  A total of 21 rhino were reported poached in Kruger National Park during December 2024 and a further 17 were reported poached during January 2025.  This escalation in rhino poaching in the Kruger National Park is of great concern.

Both SANParks and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife continue to implement a number of actions and initiatives as set out below in order to counter the threats in the hotspot areas:

* Polygraph testing of staff is continuing at Kruger National Park in line with its Integrity Management Plan. The Skukuza SAPS Stock Theft & Endangered Species Unit and the Mpumalanga Hawks (Directorate of Priority Crime Investigations) are supporting with investigations as linkages have been found between failed polygraph tests and the surge in poaching during December 2024;
* To date, investigations that have flowed from these polygraph results and subsequent investigations into the individuals, have resulted in disciplinary action against two employees in Ranger Services at Kruger National Park;
* Information related to the various rhino poaching crime scenes and modus operandi has been shared with the National DFFE Environmental Enforcement Fusion Centre in order to determine linkages between the various incidents across the country and in particular Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park in KZN;
* Co-operation with various stakeholders was strengthened to assist in alerting customs and law enforcement officials in transit and destination countries to be on the lookout for illegally traded horns over the December/January period when there was an increase in poaching in Kruger National Park;
* Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife is focused on implementing their Rhino Guardianship Strategy, which also played a role in reducing poaching in the province. This Strategy was initiated in August 2024.
* The Ezemvelo Integrity Implementation Plan was completed and approved for implementation, integrity assessments of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park staff by an independent service provider commenced, a Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park Integrity Management Plan was completed and approved for implementation. Polygraphing of 55 Ezemvelo rhino reserve managers were completed and polygraphing of 58 field staff was completed.

We continue to see some very good convictions in relation to rhino related cases, with lengthy direct imprisonment terms in respect of cases related to rhino poaching, assisting in the poaching of rhino and trafficking of rhino horns. However, the time that it takes to finalise many of these cases does remain a concern and unfortunately where the suspects are released on bail, the data tells us that a large number of them continue to commit crimes (often relating to rhino poaching and / or horn trafficking). Accordingly, expediting these cases through our courts as well as vigorously opposing bail will no doubt result in safeguarding more rhino.

The sentencing of Francis Kipampa in January this year (who was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment of which eight years were suspended for five years), as one of the accused investigated in Project Blood Orange) sends out a strong message – not only are we focusing on arresting those involved in poaching our rhino and trafficking the horn, but we are disrupting the higher up levels in the value chain. This Project is an excellent example of the integrated and multi-disciplinary approach to investigating organised crime linked to wildlife and ensuring that we target corruption, money laundering and the financial crimes associated with these activities. More of these focused investigations are needed as we continue to implement the National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking.

As we move into the second year of implementation of this Strategy, our partnerships within government, with authorities in transit and destination countries as well as with the private sector and non-governmental organisations remain critical. We need to continue to integrate and focus our effort through our existing programmes and forums, including the Integrated Wildlife Zones Initiative, the work of the South African Anti-Money Laundering Integrated Taskforce Illegal Wildlife Trade Task Force and the various task teams residing under the National Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure Priority Committee on Wildlife Trafficking.

We remain committed to the fight against rhino poaching and I believe that a renewed strengthening of our agreements and operational protocols with key countries should be our focus for 2025.

\*\* Members of the public can report any suspicious activities around wildlife to its environmental crime hotline which is 0800 205 005 or the SAPS number 10111.

To access audiovisual recordings of the Minister’s statement, click below:

[ Media Statement \_ Rhino poaching stats.mp3](https://environmentza-my.sharepoint.com/%3Au%3A/g/personal/nmakama_environment_gov_za/EYkENFJRcSJGkz7ZtB9IbSMB3JOc2qmA5Gx_eU_2tjkAhw?nav=eyJyZWZlcnJhbEluZm8iOnsicmVmZXJyYWxBcHAiOiJPbmVEcml2ZUZvckJ1c2luZXNzIiwicmVmZXJyYWxBcHBQbGF0Zm9ybSI6IldlYiIsInJlZmVycmFsTW9kZSI6InZpZXciLCJyZWZlcnJhbFZpZXciOiJNeUZpbGVzTGlua0NvcHkifX0&e=CxIR7L)

[ Media Statement \_ Rhino poaching stats \_ Raw footage.mp4](https://environmentza-my.sharepoint.com/%3Av%3A/g/personal/nmakama_environment_gov_za/EfwlGZwLBfdOuxgU9KIVHUwBHQAJKy69NFhK7VpjgeRV_g?nav=eyJyZWZlcnJhbEluZm8iOnsicmVmZXJyYWxBcHAiOiJPbmVEcml2ZUZvckJ1c2luZXNzIiwicmVmZXJyYWxBcHBQbGF0Zm9ybSI6IldlYiIsInJlZmVycmFsTW9kZSI6InZpZXciLCJyZWZlcnJhbFZpZXciOiJNeUZpbGVzTGlua0NvcHkifX0&e=yaFDRj)

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**ISSUED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY, FISHERIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

**Editor’s note: The provincial and national breakdown for January to June for 2022, 2023 and 2024 is as follows:**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Provinces and National Parks** |  **2022** | **2023** | **2024** |  |
| SANParks | 124 | 78 | 88 |  |
| Gauteng | 2 | 0 | 1 |  |
| Limpopo | 25 | 59 | 59 |  |
| Mpumalanga | 21 | 7 | 4 |  |
| North West | 24 | 12 | 18 |  |
| Eastern Cape | 0 | 17 | 4 |  |
| Free State | 4 | 0 | 6 |  |
| Northern Cape | 4 | 0 | 8 |  |
| KwaZulu-Natal | 244 | 325 | 232 |  |
| Western Cape | 0 | 1 | 0 |  |
| **Total** | **448** | **499** | **420** |  |

**Further information on some notable cases that were finalised over the reporting period:**

Conviction - GAUTENG: ORTIA CAS 184/08/2018: Illegal possession and trafficking of Rhino horn:

On 2018-08-20 two suspects namely Ntsako Miaas Maluleke and Phanuel Vutivi Chabalala were arrested at OR Tambo Airport while they were enroute to Vietnam with two boxes containing 27 rhino horns with a total weight of 29,47kg.

Both were arrested, charged and appeared in Kempton Park Regional court. Both faced 8 counts of contravening sec 57(1) NEMBA (National Environmental Environment: Biodiversity Act) 10/2004 which includes the receiving, possession conveying and export of the 27 rhino horns.

On 2024-05-09 both accused were found guilty on all counts and on 2024-07-15 the accused were sentenced as follows:

Count 1&2: Each accused sentenced to 5 years imprisonment.

Count 3&4: Each accused sentenced to 5 years imprisonment.

Count 5&6: Each accused sentenced to 5 years imprisonment.

Count 7&8: Each accused sentenced to 5 years imprisonment.

Total sentence for each accused is twenty (20) years of which five (5) years imprisonment is suspended for five (5) years on condition that the accused are not convicted of contravening Sec 57(1) NEMBA Act 10/2004 committed during period of suspension.

Effective sentence for each accused is fifteen (15) direct imprisonment. Both accused declared unfit to possess a firearm.

Conviction - SKUKUZA CAS 060/01/2019: Involvement in Rhino Poaching:

Both accused, Lucky Mkanzi and Joe Sihlangu, were field rangers attached to the Crocodile bridge (CRB) section of the KNP. In January 2019 information was received that both were involved in the transporting of suspects in the Godlene area of the Crocodile Bridge Ranger section. Carcasses of 2 white rhinoceros were also found in the section and analysis of the AVL fitted to the official vehicle placed the field rangers in the vicinity of the killed animal at the time it was determined that the animals were killed. Later the suspects made admissions, and an amount of R 41 800 was recovered from the room of Sihlangu. This was money that the accused received as payment for his involvement.

On 2024-09-04 the matter was finalised with both accused being convicted on charges under the NEMBA (for illegal hunting of rhinoceros) and the Riotous Assemblies Act (conspiracy to commit a crime). The accused were sentenced as follows:

Count 1 - 4 years imprisonment

Count 2 - 10 years imprisonment

Count 3 - 10 years imprisonment

Court ordered that sentence on count 1 will run concurrently with sentence in count 2 and 3. Effective sentence of 20 years imprisonment

Conviction - DORSET CAS 10/12/2022 and TINMYNE CAS 37/12/2022: Rhino Poaching:

Conviction in respect of 4 accused, Tshepo Kwababa, Evans Mokwena, Bethuel Ndubane and Manuel Ndlovu for counts of rhino poaching, possession of Rhino horns, money laundering, possession of unlicensed firearm, possession of a prohibited firearm (serial no removed), possession of unlicensed ammunition, trespassing on a Nature Reserve and the Immigration Act.

Counts 1 to 3 and count 9 was on Dorset CAS 10/12/2022 and counts 4 to 8 and count 10 is on Tinmyne CAS 37/12/2022

On 2024-09-26 the accused was sentenced in the Mokopane Regional court as follows:

Count 1 - 15 years’ imprisonment, Count 2 - 15 years, Count 3 - 15 years, Count 4 - 10 years, Count 7 - 5 years, Count 8 - 3 years, Count 9 - 5 years and Count 10 - 1 year.

Tshepo Kwababa and Evans Mokwena received an effective sentence of 20 years imprisonment, Manuel Ndlovu received 21 years imprisonment and Bethuel Ndubane received an effective 15 years imprisonment sentence. The sentence for Bethuel Ndubane is separate from the 24 years that he is currently serving (he was sentenced to 24 years in March 2023 in the High Court in Polokwane for 2 x Rhino poaching and murder). He is now effectively sentenced to 39 years imprisonment.

Project Blood Orange: Kabokweni CAS 180/04/2020 and Primrose CAS 287/01/2023

During April 2022 a search warrant was obtained by SAPS (SOCI Nelspruit) to search premises in Kabokweni. Six rhino horns were recovered at the scene (Kabokweni CAS 180/04/2020). This led to the registration of Project Blood Orange dealing with Corruption and Money Laundering in the illegal wildlife trafficking of Rhino horns. A multi-disciplinary team consisting of DPCI, KPMG, Crime Intelligence Head Office, SANParks, FIC and AFU was established. A dedicated prosecutor was appointed. The team was also assisted by other stakeholders including DHA, Insurance Crime Bureau, SAPS Stock Theft and Endangered Species Units in Limpopo and Mpumalanga, LCRC, FSL, Dr Cindy Harper of Onderstepoort, DPCI Head Office Wildlife Trafficking Section, DPCI SOCI in Limpopo and Gauteng, DFFE and the US Fish & Wildlife Service. The Project was investigated by SCI Mpumalanga. KPMG assisted with the financial investigation and analysis of the data.

In total, 16 accused were arrested and the 15 remaining accused are awaiting trial on a number of charges.

Downloads of cell phones and the financial investigation identified Francis Kipampa, a Congolese citizen 50 years old as a major role-player in Gauteng buying rhino horns. On 2 December 2022 search and seizure operations were conducted in Limpopo, Mpumalanga and in Gauteng. The residence of Francis Kipampa was searched and DNA swabs were obtained from equipment, exhibits in the house and the vehicle.

CCTV footage also contained valuable evidence in the case. The DNA swabs were analysed and contained DNA of white rhinos. Analysis of the cell phones provided critical evidence, including facial identification analysis.

The Accused, Francis Kipampa, was arrested on 2 February 2023. His bail was successfully opposed after his arrest. On 2025-01-15 after reaching a plea agreement with the State Francis Kipampa pleaded guilty on the following charges.

*Relevant charges:*

• Contravening sections 18(2)(a) of the Riotous Assemblies Act 17 of 1956: Conspiracy to commit crime, to wit contravening section 57(1) of the National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act 10 of 2004: Dealing in horns of rhinoceros. Kabokweni CAS 180/04/2020

• Contravening section 4 of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act 121 of 1998: Money Laundering. Approximately R1,000,000.00, generated from illegal rhino horn deals, was invested in acquiring properties, which were subsequently resold, and the profits reinvested to acquire more properties: Primrose CAS 287/01/2023

• Contravening section 43 of the Immigration Act 13 of 2002: staying in South Africa illegally: Primrose CAS 287/01/2023

*Sentence handed down by the court:*

The offences are taken as one for purposes of sentence. The accused was sentenced to eighteen (18) years imprisonment of which eight (8) years were suspended for five (5) years on the following conditions:

That the accused is not convicted of the following offences:

- Contravening sections 18(2)(a) of the Riotous Assemblies Act 17 of 1956: Conspiracy to commit crime;

- Contravening section 57(1) of the National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act 10 of 2004 or similar provincial legislation: Executing a prohibited act in connection with specially protected- or protected species;

- Contravening sections 4, 5 or 6 of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act (POCA) 121 of 1998: Money laundering;

- Contravening section 49(1)(a) of the Immigration Act 13 of 2002: Entering/staying/ leaving the Republic of South Africa without the necessary documents prescribed in the Act;

Committed during the period of suspension.

A Confiscation order was also obtained in terms of Section 18 of POCA Act to the value of R5 million as derived from his unlawful activities.