

## Wildlife crime

### CASE STUDY

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#### COMMODITIES INVOLVED

Elephant ivory, rhino horns, illicit drugs

#### CONVERGENCE TYPOLOGIES

Opportunistic convergence and diversification of illicit commodities

#### GEOGRAPHIC REGION

East Africa



In June 2019, the United States Department of Justice issued an indictment charging four men for conspiracy to smuggle rhino horn and elephant ivory valued at more than USD 7 million – Moazu Kromah (Liberian national residing in Uganda), Amara Cherif (Guinean national), Mansur Mohamed Surur (Kenyan national), and Abdi Hussein Ahmed (Kenyan national). In addition, Kromah, Cherif and Surur were charged with conspiracy to commit money laundering, and Surur and Ahmed were charged with conspiracy to possess and distribute more than 10 kg of heroin.<sup>11</sup> The case appears to present the Kromah network as a wildlife trafficking network first and foremost, which engaged in heroin trafficking opportunistically rather than as part of its usual business activities.

The four suspects are alleged members of a transnational criminal group based in East Africa engaged in the large-scale trafficking of at least 190 kg of rhino horn and 10 tonnes of ivory between 2012-2019 from Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Kenya, Mozambique, Senegal, and Tanzania to buyers in Southeast Asia and the United States. Payments from foreign buyers were often sent in the form of international wire transfers, some through U.S. financial institutions, and paid in cash. Separately, from 2018-2019, Surur and Ahmed are also alleged to have conspired to possess and distribute 10 kg of heroin to a buyer represented to be located in New York.

Kromah was initially arrested in February 2017 by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) in cooperation with the Natural Resources Conservation Network (NRCN, a Ugandan NGO) in possession of 1.3 tonnes of ivory. Although Kromah is described as being at the centre of vast ring of organised criminals, connected to at least four major criminal syndicates, the case did not progress through Ugandan courts due to suspected corrupt elements in the criminal justice system.<sup>12</sup>

However, the size and importance of the case caught the attention of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), which opened a joint investigation with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and assistance from UWA and NRCN, to dig deeper into Kromah and his network's criminal activities.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/members-african-criminal-enterprise-charged-large-scale-trafficking-rhinoceros-horns>

<sup>12</sup> <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/RB3.dec19Jan20.pdf>



*Image 1: Kromah at an airport in Entebbe, Uganda, before being extradited to the United States.  
Credit: Natural Resources Conservation Network.*

**The joint investigation** uncovered both the African and Asian ends of the network and its criminal dealings over a seven-year period. A key shipment that Kromah's network is believed to have been responsible for was six tonnes of ivory that was seized in Malaysia in December 2012, comprising four tonnes of ivory from savannah elephants in East Africa and

two tonnes of ivory from forest elephants in West Africa. A subsequent DNA analysis of the seized ivory indicated that it had originated from at least nine different African countries.<sup>13</sup> This shipment demonstrates the significant reach and criminal access of the network behind it in sourcing and consolidating ivory from such a large geographic area. These factors also undoubtedly facilitate their ability to obtain other illicit commodities.

**Kromah was arrested** for the second time in Uganda in June 2019 and promptly extradited to the United States. Cherif was also arrested in June 2019 in Senegal and later extradited to the United States in April 2020. Surur was eventually arrested in Kenya in July 2020 and extradited to the United States in January 2021. Ahmed remains a fugitive. The case is now awaiting prosecution in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

**Another significant case** demonstrating the convergence of these crime types is the arrest of the Akasha brothers, Baktash and Ibrahim, in Kenya in November 2014. The brothers were the subjects of a joint investigation between DEA and Kenya's Anti-Narcotics Unit and were charged with conspiracy to import and distribute 99 kg of heroin and 2 kg of methamphetamine into the United States and obstruction of justice, among other charges. The Akasha brothers were allegedly responsible for the manufacture, shipment, and distribution of tonnes of narcotics throughout the world for over two decades.<sup>15</sup> Conversely with

<sup>13</sup> <https://intpolicydigest.org/moazu-kromah-and-the-case-of-the-west-african-ivory-cartel/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/us-attorney-announces-extradition-kenyan-national-large-scale-trafficking-rhinoceros>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-leader-kenyan-organized-crime-family-and-his-brother-plead-guilty-narcotics>



*Image 2: (L-R) Baktash Akasha, Gulam Hussein, Ibrahim Akasha and Vijaygiri Goswami with their lawyer during a hearing at Mombasa Law Courts in February 2015. Credit: Reuters/Joseph Okanga.*

the Kromah network, the Akasha network was an established drug trafficking network which appears to have increasingly diversified into ivory trafficking in response to demand and opportunity.

**In January 2017**, an out-of-court arrangement was agreed between the United States and Kenyan authorities, and the brothers and two other defendants were extradited to the United States. It was later revealed that the brothers had conspired to pay “hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes to judges, pros-

ecutors and law enforcement officials” in Kenya to attempt to control the extradition hearings. To date, none of the corrupt individuals within the Kenyan criminal justice system have been publicly identified. In the Manhattan federal court in New York in August 2019, Baktash was sentenced to 25 years in prison<sup>16</sup> and in January 2020 Ibrahim was sentenced to 23 years in prison, to be served in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

**Although the indictment** and conviction of the Akasha brothers only related to drug trafficking

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-leader-violent-kenyan-organized-crime-family-sentenced-25-years-prison-narcotics>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kenya-drugtrafficking-usa-idUSKBN1Z92G2>

offences, analysis conducted by the Satao Project, a strategic intelligence organisation, found significant overlaps with ivory. Their analysis of phone logs, shipping documents and company records has allegedly linked the Akasha brothers to 13 large ivory shipments since 2013 with a combined weight of 30 tonnes.<sup>18</sup> Using completely different methodology, DNA analysis of large ivory seizures made between 2006 and 2015 also connected at least seven seizures to a Mombasa-based network, which is believed to denote the Akasha network. The DNA analysis was based on a “sample matching” technique, identifying pairs of ivory tusks that become separated during the trafficking process and split between different shipments. The study identified a large number of cases where pairs of tusks turned up in successive seizures that were shipped close in time through a common port, implying that the shipments were likely packed by the same trafficker.<sup>19</sup>

**Furthermore**, the DEA agent leading the investigation stated that evidence of the network’s involvement in wildlife crime was found throughout recordings made by DEA sources, and as a multi-faceted criminal organisation, ivory was just one of their money-making products. Although the DEA chose to pursue the indictment of the Akasha brothers solely on drug trafficking, it was reported that the link to wildlife crime played an important role in eventually securing their extradition to the United States.<sup>20</sup>

## GOOD PRACTICE

- **Multi-agency investigation** enabled collaboration between specialised law enforcement agencies and brought together the expertise and resources needed to tackle crime convergence in this case.
- **Specialised investigation** techniques such as undercover operations are important to gather evidence of the full criminal scenario and build a strong case for prosecution. In the Akasha case, evidence collected during undercover operations also supported the extradition request.

## INTERVENTION STRATEGY FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

- **Organised crime group mapping** is a technique to assess the level of criminality of a group and prioritise investigation efforts on those groups that pose the greatest threat. As this technique is focused on networks, it lends itself well to identifying convergence and groups that are involved in a variety of different crimes.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/aug/19/super-gangs-africa-poaching-crisis>

<sup>19</sup> Wasser, S.K. et al (2018), *Combating transnational organised crime by linking multiple large ivory seizures to the same dealer*, Science Advances Vol. 4, no. 9, accessed at: <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/4/9/eaat0625>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/aug/19/super-gangs-africa-poaching-crisis>