



U.S. Department of Justice

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 3, 2008

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PRESS RELEASE

**SIX DEFENDANTS ARRESTED FOR AFRICAN ELEPHANT IVORY SMUGGLING
CONSPIRACY OPERATING THROUGH JFK INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT**

Ivory Was Disguised As Wooden Snakes, Guitars, And Statues To Avoid Detection

Six defendants were arrested earlier today in New York, New Jersey, Virginia, and Texas for conspiring to smuggle the ivory of African elephants from Ivory Coast, Cameroon, and Uganda into the United States. A criminal complaint charging the defendants was unsealed this morning in Brooklyn federal court.¹ The defendants arrested in the New York City metropolitan area are scheduled to have their initial appearances this afternoon before United States Magistrate Judge Robert M. Levy, at the U.S. Courthouse, 225 Cadman Plaza East, Brooklyn, New York.

The charges were announced by Benton J. Campbell, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, Thomas J. Healy, Special Agent-in-Charge, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and Peter J. Smith, Special Agent-in-Charge, United States Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Office of Investigations, New York (ICE).

As set forth in the complaint, illegal trade in African elephant ivory is the major cause of the continuing decline of elephant populations in Africa. Importation of ivory into the United States has been criminalized since 1976 when the United States became a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora ("CITES"). Since then, Congress has passed the African Elephant Conservation Act, which prohibits importation of raw or worked ivory that was exported from an ivory producing country in

¹ The charges in the complaint are merely allegations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

violation of that country's laws.

The complaint alleges that defendant KEMO SYLLA and SEIDOU MFOMBOUTMOUN paid one trafficker \$15,000 to courier a shipment of ivory from Cameroon into the United States. However, most of the defendants' ivory was sent, via parcel, through JFK International Airport, accompanied by fraudulent shipping and customs documents. Since March 2006, the defendants have caused at least eight shipments to be made into New York, falsely claiming that they contained "African Wooden Handicraft" or "Wooden Statues." When Wildlife and Customs inspectors examined these shipments, however, they discovered ivory coated with clay and resin-like substances to disguise the ivory as wooden musical instruments, statues, and snakes. Seized ivory from just one shipment was appraised at a market price of \$165,000.

As part of the investigation, several shipments were delivered under the surveillance of federal agents. Agents followed these shipments to various locations in the New York City area and elsewhere. On March 21, 2008, agents traveled to an address on West 147th Street in Manhattan and seized one shipment and subsequently forfeited it to the government. Many of the shipments were brought to a storage facility in the Chelsea area of Manhattan frequented by African art dealers and collectors. The complaint details how – using surveillance, controlled deliveries, undercover purchases, shipping records, phone records, and bank records – agents discovered how the defendants obtained ivory from Africa for resale at African art shows and to private purchasers around the country. During one undercover purchase, BANDJAN SIDIME commented that it was very difficult to bring ivory into the United States, but quite easy to sell it at high prices, comparing ivory to diamonds and gold.

"The defendants plundered precious natural resources for personal profit," stated United States Attorney Campbell. "Their illegal trade threatens the continued existence of an endangered species, and will not be tolerated. We commend the agents and inspectors of the Fish and Wildlife Service and ICE for their outstanding efforts in leading the investigation and thank the officers of Customs and Border Protection for their assistance."

Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agent-in-Charge Healy stated, "The continuing illegal ivory trade places pressure on the survival of an endangered species and undermines decades worth of efforts to conserve African elephants. Joint enforcement efforts, such as those typified by this case, help curb the slaughter of elephants in Africa by holding those who would profit from ivory trafficking accountable."

"We have lifted the lid on an ivory smuggling network that exploits endangered species for lucrative profits," said ICE Special Agent-in-Charge Smith. "The arrests today send a clear message to poachers and ivory smugglers that ICE and its federal law enforcement partners are focused on putting them out of business."

The maximum term of imprisonment for any defendant convicted of smuggling is 20 years.

The government's case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Patrick Sean Sinclair and Zainab Ahmad.

The Defendants:

KEMO SYLLA

Age: 32

SEIDOU MFOMBOUTMOUN

Age: 35

MAMADI DOUMBOUYA

Age: 39

BANDJAN SIDIME

Age: 36

DRISSA DIANE

Age: 43

MAMADOU KONE

Age: 43