The United States of America has announced that it has sanctioned three officials from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from entering the United States because of their involvement in significant acts of corruption.

The former director-general of the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN), Cosma Wilungula, and two other former officials of this public institute in the DRC have been placed on the US sanctions list,according to a press release published on Wednesday.

Cosma Wilungula and two of his associates, Léonard Muamba and Augustin Ngumbi, are banned from entering the United States “due to their involvement in significant acts of corruption”, said the statement from State Department spokesman Matthew Miller.

“As officials responsible for wildlife protection, they abused their official positions by engaging in the trafficking of chimpanzees, gorillas, okapis, and other protected wildlife in the DRC,” it detailed.

According to the State Department, the animals were trafficked to “the People’s Republic of China in exchange for bribes”.

After sixteen years at the head of ICCN, the public body responsible for managing national parks in the DRC, Cosma Wilungula was suspended from his post by Environment Minister Eve Bazaiba for “mismanagement” in August 2021.

The State Department affirmed that these sanctions demonstrate the United States’ commitment to disrupting the wildlife trade while promoting accountability among officials and criminals.

In addition, US authorities have extended this entry ban to Ganda’s wife, Rose Nsele Ngokali, and Willungula’s wife, Esther Mwanga Willungula.

The statement says that as officials responsible for the protection of wildlife, they abused their official positions by getting involved in the trafficking of chimpanzees, gorillas, okapi and other protected wildlife from the DRC. , mainly to the People’s Republic of China, in exchange for bribes.

“Their corrupt transnational criminal actions have undermined the rule of law and government transparency in the DRC as well as longstanding wildlife conservation efforts,” the statement read.

This action shows that the United States stands with those in the DRC who are working to disrupt wildlife trafficking and advocate for accountability for corrupt officials and transnational criminals.

“These designations also reaffirm the United States’ commitment to fighting corruption, which is detrimental to the public interest, stunts the economic prosperity of nations, and hampers the ability of governments to effectively meet the needs of their peoples,” concludes the press release.

Allegations dismissed

In reaction to this press release from the United States sanctioning him, Cosmas Wilungula, former director general of the ICCN, rejects all these allegations. He criticizes, according to him, the ignorance of the authors of the press release of the international system which regulates the trade of protected species.

He adds that he ignores the real motive of this press release, which was published two years after his departure as head of the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature.

Cosmas Wilungula is surprised that the USA, which awarded him the US Department’s prize for conservation a few years ago, can contradict itself in this way.

He considers these sanctions to be “fake news”.