

U.S. court rules banana giant must compensate victims of Colombian paramilitary

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West Palm Beach, June 11 (RHC)-- A court in the United States has ordered banana giant Chiquita Brands International to pay compensation to victims of paramilitary violence in Colombia.

A Florida federal court jury said the company must pay \$38.3 million in damages to the families of eight Colombian men killed by the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).

Designated a terrorist organization by the U.S., AUC was known for its human rights abuses, according to EarthRights, an NGO that helped build the case. The eight plaintiffs in the case were the families of the victims, who include husbands and sons killed by the AUC, according to their lawyers.

"Our clients risked their lives to come forward to hold Chiquita to account, putting their faith in the United States justice system," said Agnieszka Fryszman, one of the lawyers leading the case.

Chiquita was ordered by a U.S. court in 2007 to pay a \$25 million fine to settle criminal charges that it did business with the AUC. The company pleaded guilty in that case to paying protection money from 2001

to 2004, which it said it did to protect employees. It said it was a victim of extortion.

However, the plaintiffs alleged that Chiquita paid the AUC nearly \$2 million despite knowing that the group was engaged in a reign of violence. The jury accepted the argument that the money transferred to the paramilitaries was used to commit war crimes such as homicides, kidnappings, extortion, torture and forced disappearances.

In the 1990s, the AUC was engaged in a bitter war against Colombian far-left fighters, aided at times by members of the armed forces. The group laid down arms in 2006, confessing to crimes and agreeing to compensate victims.

Marco Simons, general counsel at EarthRights International, hailed the verdict as “a powerful message to corporations everywhere: profiting from human rights abuses will not go unpunished.” Simons also praised the courage of the families who prevailed against a big US company in the judicial process.

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