

# Colombia May Extradite Chiquita Officials

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CARACAS, Venezuela, March 18 — Colombian officials said over the weekend that they would consider seeking the extradition of senior executives of Chiquita Brands International after the company pleaded guilty in United States federal court to making payments to paramilitary death squads.

Chiquita, one of the world's largest banana producers, agreed to pay a fine of \$25 million last week to the United States Justice Department to settle the case. Chiquita told the Justice Department that from 1997 to 2004, a subsidiary in Colombia had paid \$1.7 million to right-wing paramilitary groups, which are classified by the United States government as terrorist organizations.

The company said that the payments had been motivated by concern for the safety of employees, and that similar payments had also been made to left-wing Colombian groups.

Officials from Chiquita, which is based in Cincinnati, did not respond Sunday to repeated requests for comment.

President Álvaro Uribe of Colombia told reporters on Saturday that extradition "should be from here to there and from there to here." Colombia, the Bush administration's closest ally in South America, has extradited hundreds of drug-trafficking suspects to the United States since Mr. Uribe took office in 2002.

Chiquita, whose history in Colombia goes back more than a century, said it voluntarily informed the Justice Department in Washington of its payments to the paramilitary groups in 2003, after the organizations' classification as terrorist organizations.

The company's former chief executive from 2002 to 2004, Cyrus Freidheim Jr., on Friday told the board of directors of the Sun-Times Media Group, of which he is currently chief executive, that he is among present and former officials at Chiquita that may be subjects of the investigation in the United States.

Tammy Chase, a spokeswoman for Sun-Times, declined to comment Sunday on Colombia's potential efforts to extradite current or former Chiquita executives.

Extraditions of prominent American business executives to Latin America are rare. Though the possibility of any American executives of Chiquita doing jail time in Colombia may be slim, the company is coming under greater scrutiny there despite the sale in 2004 of Banadex, its Colombia unit, for about \$43.5 million.

United Fruit Company, one of the companies that merged to create Chiquita, was long considered a bastion of American influence in Colombia's banana-growing regions. Thousands of striking United Fruit workers were massacred in Colombia in 1928, an incident that made its way into "One Hundred Years of Solitude," the epic novel by Gabriel García Márquez.

In 2003, a report by the Organization of American States said that a ship used by Chiquita's Colombian subsidiary may also have been used for an illicit shipment of 3,000 rifles and 2.5 million bullets for Colombian paramilitary groups. The chief prosecutor's office in Colombia said last week that it would ask the United States Justice Department for details about the shipment, thought to have been made in 2001.

Colombia's current government has also been accused of ties to the right-wing paramilitaries, which also exported large amounts of cocaine to the United States. A widening scandal tying prominent supporters of Mr. Uribe, including the former chief of the executive branch's intelligence service, has resulted in several resignations and calls to oppose a proposed trade agreement between Colombia and the United States.