

Colombian prosecutor probing U.S. firms

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

Colombia's chief prosecutor stood between the white plastic-sheathed remains of two dismembered teenage sisters. On the rust-colored dirt around him lay remains of nearly 60 newly unearthed victims of paramilitary death squads.

Not just their killers but those who bankrolled them must be brought to justice, Mario Iguaran told reporters last week at the mass grave in the country's eastern plains.

"You can clearly see that they didn't pay for security, but for blood," Iguaran said.

He spoke ahead of a trip to Washington this week to seek aid for his overburdened office and help obtain evidence against U.S.-based multinationals he's investigating for allegedly financing the paramilitaries.

Iguaran meets with U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales on Monday and Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, on Tuesday. With both, he is sure to talk about Chiquita Brands and the Alabama-based coal company Drummond Co. Inc.

Thousands of Colombians disappeared in the past decade, most victims of right-wing militias that emerged in the 1980s to fight leftist rebel groups.

The paramilitaries quickly evolved into mafias, enriching themselves through cocaine trafficking, theft and extortion in large chunks of the country, particularly the Caribbean coast. Large landowners, politicians and corporations bankrolled the militias to expand their holdings, while police and military officers turned a blind eye.

President Alvaro Uribe, a firm U.S. ally, has cracked down hard on the left-wing guerrillas, while negotiating a peace pact with the paramilitaries in 2003. Ex-paramilitary fighters seeking to benefit from reduced sentences under a government amnesty have led authorities to clandestine graves in vast areas they once controlled.

With thousands of victims still to be unearthed, Iguaran is now going after the businesses that he alleges helped pay the bills.

Fruit giant Chiquita agreed in March to pay \$25 million to settle with the U.S. Department of Justice after acknowledging that its Colombian subsidiary, Banadex, secretly funneled \$1.7 million to the death squads operating in zones where it had banana plantations.

In 2001, a Banadex ship was used to unload 3,000 rifles and thousands of rounds of ammunition for the paramilitaries. At the time, the paramilitaries were consolidating control of the Uraba banana region through massacres and assassinations. Chiquita later sold Banadex but still buys Colombian bananas.

Cincinnati-based Chiquita says it was a victim of paramilitary extortion. In a statement it said its payments to the militias "were always motivated by our good faith concern for the safety of our employees."

But a number of leading Colombians have demanded the extradition of U.S.-based Chiquita executives. And last week, Rep. William Delahunt, a Democrat from Massachusetts, called for an investigation into the practices here of both Chiquita and Drummond.

"This was a criminal relationship," Iguaran said. "Money and arms and, in exchange, the bloody pacification of Uraba."

Drummond is being sued by the families of three union activists killed in 2001 while employed at one of its Colombian mines. The lawsuit, to be heard this summer by a federal judge in Alabama, alleges the

company paid paramilitaries to kill the men. Drummond denies the charges and says its executives have had no dealings with any of Colombia's armed groups.

Witnesses for the plaintiffs contend Drummond's security team worked closely with paramilitaries. And opposition lawmakers have accused one security coordinator employed by Drummond, retired army Col. Julian Villate, of conspiring to assassinate leftists and union members.

Drummond calls the allegations baseless. Villate, who worked in an undisclosed capacity for the U.S. Embassy in Colombia two years ago, has not answered the charges.

Businesses saw backing paramilitaries as a lesser of evils. Colombia's leftist rebels have long targeted multinationals, bombing oil pipelines and, in Drummond's case, coal trains bound for its Caribbean port.

Many jailed paramilitary bosses think that just as they were compelled to confess their crimes under Uribe's peace pact, so should their pinstriped backers.

The paramilitaries' main spokesman, Ivan Duque, told The Associated Press in Medellin's Itagui prison this month that many commanders intend to begin speaking publicly about "the financing by the banana industry, some coal companies, big national businesses."

"Those who broke the law," he said, "must face the consequences, just as we are."