

# Victims of Colombian Conflict Sue Chiquita Brands

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Victims of Colombia's civil conflict sued the banana importer [Chiquita Brands International](#) yesterday, accusing it of making payments to a paramilitary group responsible for thousands of killings.

The lawsuit, filed in Federal District Court in Manhattan, accused Chiquita of complicity in hundreds of deaths because of its financial support of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, also known by its Spanish initials, A.U.C.

The plaintiffs include relatives of 387 people thought to have been killed by the group, which was responsible for some of the worst massacres in Colombia's long-running conflict and was designated a terrorist group by the United States government in 2001.

The families are seeking \$7.86 billion in damages from Chiquita, which they accuse of abetting atrocities including terrorism, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

A spokesman said Chiquita, which is based in Cincinnati, would fight the civil lawsuit, one of several filed recently by Colombian citizens and human rights groups.

Chiquita has acknowledged that its former subsidiary, Banadex, had paid \$1.7 million to the A.U.C. from 1997 to 2004. The company has also admitted that the payments were illegal; it pleaded guilty this year to violating counterterrorism laws and agreed to pay a \$25 million fine.

But Chiquita has repeatedly insisted that it had no choice but to pay protection money to groups that had threatened to turn death squads loose on its banana plantations and employees.

"We reiterate that Chiquita and its employees were victims and that the actions taken by the company were always motivated to protect the lives of our employees and their families," a Chiquita spokesman, Michael Mitchell, said.

The New York lawyer who filed the lawsuit on behalf of the families, Jonathan Reiter, said Chiquita's support of the A.U.C. went beyond mere "protection payments" and included the shipment of thousands of rifles.

Chiquita sold its Colombian subsidiary in 2004, but it continues to buy Colombian bananas from independent suppliers.