

COLOMBIA - Chiquita Admits to Paying Colombian Paramilitary Group on U.S. Terror List

Adam Isaacson, Ignacio Gomez, Juan Gonzalez & Amy Goodman, Democracy Now!

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Friday, March 23rd, 2007 - [Democracy Now! News Program](#) - The Cincinnati-based fruit company Chiquita has found itself at the center of another major controversy over its practices in Latin America. On Monday Chiquita admitted it had paid off the group AUC, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia which is considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. government. Chiquita has agreed to pay the U.S. government a fine of \$25 million dollars on the condition that it doesn't have to reveal the names of the executives involved. The \$25 million dollar penalty comes out to around half of what Chiquita received from selling its Colombian subsidiary in 2004. Chiquita has defended the payments, saying it fell victim to an extortion racket that threatened its employees.

- **James Thompson:** "The payments made by the company at all times were motivated by the company's good faith and desire and concern for the safety of all of its employees. Nevertheless, we recognize the obligation to disclose the facts and circumstances of this admittedly difficult situation to the United States government and the Department of Justice."

Colombian authorities have taken a different view. Colombia's attorney general has said he will seek the extradition of eight Chiquita employees allegedly involved in making the payments. The attorney general, Mario Iguaran said: "The relationship was not one of the extortionist and the extorted but a criminal relationship... When you pay a group like this you are conscious of what they are doing."

Colombian prosecutors have also accused Chiquita of providing arms to the right-wing paramilitary groups that were then used to push leftist rebels out of an area in northern Colombia where Chiquita had its banana plantations.

AMY GOODMAN: This isn't the first time Chiquita has been accused of criminal activity in Colombia and Latin America, and for more on this story, we are now joined by three guests. Here in our firehouse studio in New York, investigative journalist Nicholas Stein, has covered Chiquita for *Fortune Magazine* and the *Colombian Journalism Review*. Joining us in Washington, D.C., Adam Isaacson, director of the Colombia Program at the Center for International Policy. On the phone from Colombia, Ignacio Gomez, renowned journalist who has broken major stories on Chiquita's dealings in Colombia. We are going first to Adam Isaacson in Washington, D.C. Talk about, first, what the developments this week, the \$25 million fine on Chiquita that it has agreed to pay, and the history of the Chiquita brand's international Chiquita company.

ADAM ISSACSON: Sure. First, what the guilty plea agreement says is that Chiquita, over the course of seven years between 1997 and 2004, made 100 or more payments, totaling about \$1.7 million to the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, which most people just call the paramilitaries. The United Self-Defense Forces, which are on the United States list terrorist groups, have killed about 20,000 Colombians in the last 20 years. They are responsible for about 3/4 of all killings in Colombia in the last 20 years. They are founded by large landowners and by factions of the military as well as financed by drug lords.

These guys came to Chiquita brands in 1997 and said to them, we are going to kick the guerrillas out of the Uraba region, which is the region of northwestern Colombia where the banana, really the banana heartland of Colombia, and we want money from you in order to do this. Chiquita took this as a threat, but willingly made the payments over the course of a long time, and indeed the paramilitaries in that Uraba region day after day carried out massacre after massacre, killing thousands of people and cleansing the region not just of guerrillas but of most civilian noncombatants and especially anybody who was trying to organize the labor unions, the laborers, in the banana plantations.

Now, Chiquita, for those of you who have studied Latin America, in the past Chiquita used to be called United Fruit. It is hard to actually have a course in high school or college on the history of the United States and Latin America, without having at least passed over the United Fruit Company, because it has a pretty bad reputation over the last really 80 or 90 years. United Fruit basically introduced the banana to the United States around the turn of the last century, but in doing so they became very wealthy and accrued huge land holdings all through Central America and in the north of Colombia. They became so powerful that they were really the kingmakers. They had the ears of presidents and they orchestrated military coups, they made sure that whoever was in power in the countries where they were was favorable to United Fruit's investments.

One of the most notorious cases was in 1954 in Guatemala, when the elected president of Guatemala decided to try to expropriate some of the unused land that United Fruit had control of. The CIA, claiming they were communists, helped orchestrate a coup. Guatemala had about 30 years of military dictatorships after that and a bloody, bloody civil war. Also, in 1927, in Colombia itself, workers on united fruit plantations in northern Colombia protested and there was a massacre, which Colombians just call the Cienaga Massacre, that killed hundreds. We do not even know how many were killed by that. But Colombians remember that to this day.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Adam Isaacson, I wanted to ask you about the particular events of this past week because my understanding is that the company informed the U.S. Government a couple of years ago that it was making these payments, and suddenly now we're getting a plea agreement. Was there actually an indictment before the plea agreement, or did they just immediately go to the court and plead guilty without even being charged?

ADAM ISSACSON: There was an indictment, and I am not exactly sure about the order in which it happened, but the document, the public document you can read is indeed an indictment. Chiquita back in, it was mid-2003, and then they publicly announced in the spring of 2004, that they had voluntarily given this information to the U.S. Justice Department after they had made the decision to leave Colombia and also had some management changes, they voluntarily turned this over. So, at the time, it looked like a really good example of, you know, what the public relations people call scandal management. Get it all out now, don't stonewall, and the thing will blow over, and it looked like it worked, because in 2004 when they made the announcement, there were a couple wire stories and then it just disappeared.

This week, there's a firestorm, and a key reason for that is the Colombian government's own on reaction, saying they are going to extradite some of these Cincinnati based executives of Chiquita, which some people see as them trying to distract attention from an ongoing scandal involving the president's own supporters being tied to paramilitaries. Others see it though as Colombians just being angry about, you know, they're extraditing hundreds of their own citizens to the United States to face trial for drug crimes, and, meanwhile, U.S. citizens who have trafficked drugs out of Colombia or who have paid armed groups are getting slaps on the wrist. So, it really taps into some resentment in Colombia. But it's kept the story very much up front this week.

AMY GOODMAN: Adam Issacson, I want to bring Ignacio Gomez into the conversation, renowned Colombian journalist, Director of investigations for the Colombian public affairs television show: Noticias Uno. You're speaking to us from Bogotá, Ignacio Gomez; your assessment of the \$25 million fine and Chiquita's involvement in Colombia and the AUC, this paramilitary in Colombia?

IGNACIO GOMEZ: The U.S. media is losing the complete picture, because in Colombia we are not talking

just about the recent case, and the payments, we are talking about a complete story of corruption in Chiquita dating back to 1994 in Colombia. According to court documents, to run the biggest operation in war here from—in the Uraba in the north of the country. What happened then was that Chiquita did a payment, an illegal payment, to the Colombian customs for an attempt to get a port facility. And this port facility was the headquarters of the Banana Bloc of a lot of operations of the Bloque Bananero of the AUC. And then the case also involves—

AMY GOODMAN: Ignacio, can you explain what the AUC does? The paramilitary? Most Americans had never even heard of them.

IGNACIO GOMEZ: Well, since the beginning, in 1988, when the banana operations start to go on in Uraba, the unions tried to negotiate a complete deal for the entire workers of the farm, and the banana managers wanted to negotiate farm by farm. The guerillas start to be involved in the organization of the union. The paramilitary start to run a killing operation. There were more than four massacres in '88, and the final operation for them is thought to be due to take place in 1996 when Chiquita got the port facility to run the complete banana operation there.

AMY GOODMAN: Adam Isaacson, let me ask about the AUC and about Chiquita saying they were paying this money, defending it, to say they were protecting their workers, when here we have Ignacio Gomez saying that the AUC was known for terrorizing them.

ADAM ISSACSON: Well, Ignacio is right. The AUC, basically just the origins of the AUC: about 20-25 years ago, after wealthy Colombians and the some of the newly rich drug lords in Colombia decided they had it with being harassed and extorted by guerrilla groups, they began to form citizen militias and arming them very strongly and got a lot of help from the Colombia military in doing that. These sort of militias or vigilantes or self-defense groups soon became called paramilitaries, and they grew enormously, largely because of the drug money they were getting. They operated not by fighting the guerrillas on battlefields; they chose to fight citizens, civilians who happened to live in areas under guerrilla control, like the banana heartland of Uraba.

They began to target reformist or leftist leaders, too. Leftist political parties, union organizers, school teachers, human-rights defenders, and killed thousands of them. This has continued up to the present day. The AUC is now formally demobilized after having negotiated w/ the government, the center right government, really rightwing government of Álvaro Uribe in Colombia. But they still exist and they still are carrying out killings right now.

In the banana-growing region we're talking about, yeah, they were hitting up all of the—anybody who owned a business, really, asking them for money, asking them for contributions. A lot of businesses gave these contributions willingly and admit that they did so because there were so tired of the guerrillas and were just happy to have a scorched earth campaign to make it possible to do business. Chiquita claims that were under duress, but they made about 100 of these payments, so, you know, eventually after your hundredth payment or so the duress argument starts to wear a bit thin. Clearly, maybe, they probably were protecting their workers to some extent, because the paramilitaries would have been attacking their facilities had they not paid up, or they would have claimed that the guerillas would have been, but in the end they were really making it possible to do business in a very, very brutal way. The paramilitaries were with the \$1.7 million that came from Chiquita and more, probably more from other companies.

The last point I would like to make just quickly, is that when this happened, 1996-1997, the governor of the part of Colombia that we're talking about, who was governor while they were expanding the paramilitary presence in the Uraba region, was Álvaro Uribe, who is now president of the whole country.

JUAN GONZALEZ: You mentioned that and also you mentioned that the paramilitary groups have been largely have been largely disbanded and Carlos Castano, their leader, was jailed. But yet, recently as you also mentioned there's been a lot of information in Colombia about ties of the Uribe government officials to some of these same paramilitary groups. Could you talk about that?

ADAM ISSACSON: Yeah, there's a growing scandal in Colombia right now in which information is leaking out, a lot of it coming from the paramilitary's own laptop computers and things that have been confiscated and other witnesses coming forward, showing that people like the head of presidential intelligence during Uribe's first term, governors, pro-Uribe governors of several departments or provinces in northern Colombia—right now it's 10 Senators and Congress people all from Uribe's bloc in congress either under arrest, or fugitives and several more already under investigation by the authorities, all of them being investigated for either meeting with and offering verbal shows of support to the paramilitary, and in some cases even helping the paramilitaries plan and carry out massacres and operations. Already one military colonel has been put up in the scandal and even people in the defense ministry are expecting more military officers to fall into this.

It is growing, it is snowballing, every week there seem to be new arrests, and it's been what people who watch Colombia are not surprised by, because we knew there was a huge sector of Colombia's government and Colombia's ruling class that had made their deal with the paramilitaries, that had been in bed with them. And the fact that this is coming out now in a big way, is good for Colombia, but it is also important that people here in Washington are paying attention to it because it does tell us a lot about who we have been aiding to the tune of \$5.4 billion since 2000. And hopefully the new Democratic congress will be going into its new aid for Colombia with its eyes wide open as information about this scandal continues to come north.

AMY GOODMAN: Interesting this government should reveal this information, the fine, the \$25 million, right after Bush leaves Colombia.

ADAM ISAACSON: That is interesting. I guess that's mainly up to the Justice Department itself, they didn't want this to cloud the headlines when President Bush spent his day in Colombia a week ago Sunday.

AMY GOODMAN: Adam Isaacson, I know you have to leave. We want Ignacio Gomez to stay with us. We will also be joined in our New York studio by Nicholas Stein to talk about the exposé of Chiquita that happened almost ten years ago in the Cincinnati Inquirer and how it is that that wasn't followed up on, or why it was that the Cincinnati Inquirer ultimately apologized for doing the explosive exposé that it did. Adam Isaacson, director of the Colombia Program at the Center for International Policy in Washington.

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