

Colombia opens probe into Chiquita militia links

By Hugh Bronstein
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BOGOTA - Colombian prosecutors said on Tuesday they opened a criminal probe of U.S.-based Chiquita Brands International for payments it made to right-wing militias branded as terrorists by Washington.

In March, Chiquita agreed to pay a \$25 million fine to settle a complaint with the U.S. Justice Department, which accused the company of paying paramilitary groups more than \$1.7 million from 1997 to 2004.

Colombia says it may seek the extradition of Chiquita officials involved in making the payments.

"This is a criminal investigation involving seven Chiquita executives," a spokesman for the attorney general said.

Chiquita, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, said in a statement it had not been notified of the probe.

The statement said Chiquita had to make payments to both left- and right-wing militias to protect its employees at a time when kidnappings and murders were frequent in Colombia's northern banana-growing region.

A civil lawsuit seeking \$7.86 billion was filed last month in a New York federal court accusing Chiquita of funding and arming paramilitary groups.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of 393 victims and their families and was one of several complaints by Colombian victims against Chiquita in the United States this year.

Attorney General Mario Iguaran said his investigation would establish whether Chiquita was forced to make protection payments or was guilty of financing terror.

Colombia's Marxist rebels and their paramilitary enemies are designated as terrorist groups by the U.S. government.

Conservative President Alvaro Uribe, first elected in 2002, has cut crime and sparked economic growth with a U.S.-backed security push and a peace deal under which more than 30,000 paramilitaries have turned in their guns.

Uribe has sent hundreds of suspected drug traffickers to the United States and says extradition should work the other way around for Americans who have broken

Colombian laws.

International law expert Carl Tobias of the University of Richmond said it is unlikely that the U.S. government would agree to send Chiquita executives to Colombia to face charges.

The investigation comes as U.S. Democratic lawmakers threaten to block a trade deal with Colombia based on concerns that Uribe has not done enough to safeguard human rights in the Andean country.

"This could be a signal to the world that Colombia is serious about human rights and it could also be an indirect way for Colombia to put pressure on Capitol Hill to pass the trade deal," Tobias said.

(Editing by John O'Callaghan)