

Chiquita settles with families of U.S. victims of Colombia's FARC

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By Brendan Pierson

NEW YORK (Reuters) - Families of six U.S. citizens who were kidnapped and killed by Colombia's FARC guerrillas have settled with Chiquita Brands International, which they had accused of financially supporting the former rebel group turned political party, according to court filings on Monday.

The out-of-court settlements were disclosed the day the families' claims were scheduled to go to trial in federal court in Florida. Their terms were not made public.

The families had accused banana distributor Chiquita of providing more than \$220,000 in material support to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) from 1989 to 1999, in payments averaging \$32,000 a year.

They claimed that made the company liable for the FARC's killing of six Americans - five Christian missionaries and a geologist - in the 1990s.

"It has been a very lengthy journey for the families of the victims, and we hope this agreement can bring them some closure," said Ramon Rasco, one of the lawyers representing the plaintiffs.

Gary Osen, another plaintiffs' lawyer, declined to comment on the size of the settlements.

Chiquita said in a statement that it was "pleased to have reached an amicable resolution with the plaintiffs."

"With this matter concluded, Chiquita will continue its focus on being a good citizen and partner in the countries where we do business," it said.

Last month, U.S. District Judge Kenneth Marra ruled that Chiquita would have to face a jury trial of claims that the company was liable to the families under the federal Anti-Terrorism Act.

The claims are part of a long-running consolidated litigation by citizens of the United States and other countries over payments made by Chiquita to Colombian paramilitary groups. The case would have been the first trial in that litigation, and the first Anti-Terrorism Act trial against a U.S. corporation.

The U.S. government designated the FARC as a foreign terrorist organization in 1997.

Chiquita argued in court papers that it was the victim of extortion by the FARC and other groups.

The company pleaded guilty in 2007 to engaging in transactions with a different Colombian designated terror group and agreed to pay a \$25 million criminal fine.

The FARC, which kept its acronym by changing its name to the Revolutionary Alternative Common Force, signed a peace accord with Colombia in late 2016, putting an end to its part in a conflict that killed more than 220,000 people over five decades.

(Reporting by Brendan Pierson in New York; additional reporting by Alison Frankel; editing by Rosalba O'Brien and G Crosse)