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Federal Court Jury in West Palm Beach Rules Against Chiquita Brands International in Landmark Case

West Palm Beach, FL – Today, a federal jury in West Palm Beach, Florida, delivered a significant verdict in favor of the Plaintiffs against Chiquita Brands International. The case, which has been ongoing for 17 years, centered on Chiquita's financial support of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) from 1996 to 2004. The AUC is a violent paramilitary group that operated in Colombia.

Plaintiffs successfully argued that Chiquita, which had extensive banana plantations in Colombia's Urabá and Magdalena regions, began paying the AUC for protection against the FARC, a left-wing armed group that threatened their operations. Initially formed in 1996 by local business interests as a "self-protection" force, the AUC's role quickly escalated from protecting banana zones to committing widespread atrocities.

Testimony at trial revealed that the AUC oversaw a reign of terror, slaughtering thousands of innocent civilians, including relatives of the Plaintiffs, merely suspected of sympathizing with the FARC. The AUC also targeted union leaders, human rights activists, and strike participants, all while protecting Chiquita's interests.

The evidence further established that Chiquita facilitated the AUC's operations by allowing the group to use its ports for importing weapons and its banana boats for exporting cocaine to the U.S. and Europe. Despite the AUC being designated a terrorist organization by the United States in 2001, Chiquita continued its payments and support until 2004, when the U.S. Department of Justice initiated an investigation. Chiquita ultimately pled guilty to a felony in 2007 and paid a \$25 million fine to the U.S. government. However, the company provided no restitution to the victims' families.

In 2007, the International Rights Advocates (IRAdvocates) filed the first civil case against Chiquita on behalf of the families of those murdered. This case was joined

by four other legal teams in a multidistrict litigation, collectively representing over 5,000 families. IRAdvocates, along with their co-counsel Conrad & Scherer, LLP, represent 2,451 of these families.

The recently concluded trial was a “bellwether” trial involving nine families from the various groups, designed to provide insight into potential jury awards and encourage settlements for the remaining cases. IRAdvocates represented two Plaintiffs in this trial: Mariela Isabel Sierra Soto, mother of the AUC victim Francisco “Tito” de Jesus Jinete Sierra, and Lina Maria Berdugo Lechuga, his wife. Tito was murdered by the AUC in 2004, and Mariela and Lina traveled to the United States for the first time to testify and seek justice. Twenty years later, they were awarded 38.3 million by the jury.

Terry Collingsworth, Executive Director of IRAdvocates, commented on the verdict: “While nothing can bring back Tito, these brave women and the other Plaintiffs in this case have demonstrated that corporate criminals like Chiquita can be held accountable through courage and perseverance. Hopefully, this verdict will inspire others to fight for corporate accountability. In my experience, corporations operating in the global economy will do whatever they can get away with. We just showed them that there are real consequences for corporate outlaws.”

Collingsworth also praised the legal team: “We were incredibly fortunate to work with an outstanding team led by Jack Scarola and his firm, Searcy Denney Scarola Barnhart & Shipley, P.A., one of the best trial firms in the country. Lawyers from the four other Plaintiff groups in the bellwether also did remarkable work. Over the course of 17 years, we worked together to overcome the many obstacles that Chiquita placed in our path to justice.”

If the other pending cases are not resolved by negotiation, a second bellwether trial is scheduled for July 14, 2024.

Contact information:

Please contact Terry Collingsworth, Executive Director at International Rights Advocates at tc@iradvocates.org with any inquiries.

For further information and to stay updated on IRAdvocates' work and contributions to this important discourse, follow Terry on Twitter @tpcollingsworth and visit our website at www.internationalrightsadvocates.org.

About International Rights Advocates:

International Rights Advocates (IRAdvocates) is a global organization committed to eradicating slave labor and other human rights violations, especially in global supply chains. They focus on strategic litigation, training, research, policy advocacy, and coalition building, tackling issues from India and West Africa to South America. IRAdvocates prioritizes cases against multinational companies involved in the worst forms of forced labor, aiming to protect the rights of trafficked and enslaved individuals in these supply chains.

For more detailed information about their work, you can visit their [website here](#).