Study: Port-operator lapses could allow terrorist attack

by Ted Bridgess
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lapses by private port operators, shipping lines or truck drivers could allow terrorists to smuggle weapons of mass destruction into the United States, according to a government review of security at American seaports.

The nation's $75 million, three-year study by the Homeland Security Department included inspections at a New Jersey cargo terminal involved in the dispute over a Dubai company's new-ibanned bid to take over significant operations at six major U.S. ports.

The previously undisclosed results from the study found that cargo containers can be opened secretly during shipment to add or remove items without alerting U.S. authorities, according to government documents marked "sensitive security information" obtained by The Associated Press.

The study found serious lapses by private companies at five U.S. and American ports, aboard ships and on trucks and trains "that would enable unmanifested materials or weapons of mass destruction to be introduced into the supply chain."

The study, expected to be completed this fall, used satellites and experimental monitors to trace roughly 20,000 cargo containers out of the millions arriving each year from Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Most containers are sealed with mechanical bolts that can be cut and replaced or have doors that can be removed by diamond-tipped hammers.

The risks from smuggled weapons are especially worrisome because U.S. authorities largely decide which cargo containers to inspect based on shipping records of what is thought to be inside.

Among the study's findings:

- Safety problems were not limited to overseas ports. A warehouse in Maine was graded less secure than any in Pakistan, Turkey or Brazil. "There is a perception that U.S. facilities benefit from superior security-protection measures," the study said. "This mind set may contribute to a misplaced sense of confidence in American business practices."

- No records were kept of "curiosity" inspections in Guatemala for containers filled with Starbucks Corp. coffee beans shipped to the West Coast. "Coffee beans were accessible to anyone entering the facility," the study said. It found significant mistakes on manifests and other paperwork. In a statement to the AP, Starbucks said it was reviewing its security procedures.

- Truck drivers in Brazil were permitted to take cargo containers home overnight and park along public streets. Trains in the U.S. stopped in rail yards that did not have fences and were in high-crime areas. A shipping-industry adage reflects unease over such practices: "A container at rest is a container at risk."

- Practices at Turkey's Port of Izmir were "totally inadequate by U.S. standards."

- No inspectors in place to prevent the driver from placing unmanifested material into the container.