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[ISN] Ship security system draws FBI's attention

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By BILL HENSEL JR.

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A ship security concept being marketed out of Houston would be a welcome tool for authorities if terrorists tried to hit the Port of Houston, the FBI said Thursday.

While the agency doesn't endorse commercial products, Special Agent Jim Walsh said, a remote-control security system like that developed by VIP Systems could be useful.

"I do think this is a unique system," Walsh said of the satellite-driven vessel security program being offered by VIP Systems and its partners.

The system, unveiled in 2004, was reviewed Thursday at a maritime security gathering at the Port of Houston Authority headquarters.

Among the features of the VIP system is one that would allow authorities to see, via satellite, inside a vessel like an oil tanker at sea and remotely shut down its engines if it were commandeered.

The FBI, which would respond jointly with the Coast Guard, would rather deal with such a vessel out at sea than in port, Walsh said.

One major fear of port officials throughout the world is that an oil tanker could be commandeered and used as a weapon of mass destruction, said Alex Genin, chief executive and president of VIP Systems.

SkyPort International, a secure broadband satellite communications provider that is working with VIP on the system, has a contract with one company that had a vessel commandeered by pirates on the open seas in Asia.

VIP is talking with several foreign governments about using its security system, Genin said, but vessel owners or insurance companies likely would have to be the ones to fund implementation.

The system also features biometrics to identify ship crew members.

SkyPort also is working with a Florida company that has developed a

system to scan vessels and containers before they enter or leave ports. That company, SeaAway, wants to test its system at the Port of Houston, according to Bernadette Kroecker, chief executive and managing director.

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