



Agent Orange was used to defoliate jungle vegetation during the Vietnam War.

aimed at undermining the Stelman exposure index, which the US National Academy of Sciences committee also evaluated and ultimately endorsed," he says. "The Stelman model is not perfect," he concedes, "but it is a substantial, significant improvement over existing methods." The new paper's authors were unavailable for comment before *Nature* went to press.

Almost all research on veterans is funded by the VA. Several researchers interviewed by *Nature* complain that non-VA scientists face enormous difficulties in gaining access to the department's data. One of the key IOM recommendations, says Savitz, is that government agencies should create a clearing-house to streamline and ease access to military data. This could "set a model for future conflicts," he says. John Sommer, executive director of the Washington bureau of the American Legion, a veterans body, says he intends to renew discussions with Congress and the VA. "We will push to have the study done." ■

Declan Butler

See Editorial, page 781.

Deal for Holy Land artefacts

A draft agreement on how archaeological sites and artefacts should be allocated in the event of an Israel-Palestine peace deal was received positively last week by Israeli archaeologists in Jerusalem.

There are nearly 7,000 archaeological sites in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, of which about 1,000 have been excavated, according to a database compiled as part of the work on the agreement. Finds include artefacts such as the Dead Sea scrolls. But the future disposition of these sites has not been discussed in the framework of talks between Israelis and Palestinians, even though such excavations are closely tied to both national identities and to historical and political claims to the territory.

Under the draft agreement, control of sites and artefacts would be determined by territorial sovereignty, and artefacts removed since Israel gained control of the West Bank in 1967 would be handed over to the new state. It also recommends that the designated world-heritage site containing the Old City of Jerusalem be enlarged to include important sites nearby. Archaeology here would be governed by a special regime in which both Israelis and Palestinians would participate. However, Israeli scholars would be allowed five years to complete study and publication of finds in such areas before their repatriation.

In the case of specific items of

archaeological heritage that have unique symbolic value — such as the Dead Sea scrolls — the agreement recommends that both sides consider loan and exchange pacts.

Debby Hershman, a curator at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, welcomes the draft but says that it does not guarantee cooperation. "Countries Israel has signed peace agreements with — Jordan and Egypt — and to which artefacts have been repatriated, have consistently refused to loan these objects to Israeli museums," she says.

The scrolls are a particularly emotive issue. Uzi Dahari, deputy director of the Israel Antiquities Authority in Jerusalem, likes the agreement, but says that the scrolls must remain in Israeli hands. Nazmi al-Jubeih, one of the Palestinian members of the working group, disagrees. "We do not accept the argument that the scrolls are part of Israeli heritage. Jewish heritage is part of our heritage and our history as well." International treaties, al-Jubeih notes, usually make territorial sovereignty and not cultural affiliation the determining factor in deciding who controls sites and artefacts.

Al-Jubeih will present the draft to Palestinian scholars and officials at a public meeting similar to the one held in Israel, and he says it has been well-received by those who have already seen it in the Palestinian community. ■

Haim Watzman

Costa Rican biotech centre in peril

Costa Rica is on the verge of losing a multimillion-euro donation from the European Union (EU) to build a state-of-the-art biotech facility, because of government procrastination.

The EU put forward €10.9 million (US\$17.3 million) for the National Centre for Biotechnological Innovation (CENIBiot) in 2005, but is threatening to withdraw it because the Costa Rican government has so far failed to produce the necessary contracts to purchase equipment and begin construction at the facility. The government, which is to contribute €4 million, is finally expected to issue its first tenders this week. But these will have to be answered, reviewed and approved by the end of this year if the money is to be kept. "The project is at a critical stage," says Roelf Smit, the first councillor at the European Commission's

delegation in San José, Costa Rica.

CENIBiot was conceived as a technology-transfer laboratory to meet the needs of the Costa Rican economy, mainly in agriculture. Planners hope the centre will aid Costa Rica's coffee, pineapple and banana trade and lead to the development of locally grown biofuels. But two years after its inception, equipment has not been purchased and renovations have yet to begin at the site in a San José suburb. Marta Valdez, CENIBiot's director, declined to comment on the exact cause of the delay, and the government's Ministry of Science and Technology did not respond to *Nature's* enquiries.

Smit says the decision to recall the money is standard procedure for the EU. "We don't want to have money sitting around for more than three years," he says. ■

Geoff Brumfiel