determine success, may distort the process and create a ‘slippery slope,’” it says. Since the group turned in the report, says panel co-chair Doug Richman, a virologist at the VA San Diego Healthcare System, “the silence has been deafening.”

Wray confirms that she intends to focus VA research on certain diseases prevalent among veterans, such as diabetes. Although scientists agree that this could be beneficial, they’re also concerned about becoming too narrowly focused. “You can’t dictate by fiat where the discoveries at the bench are going to come from,” says John Cowdery, associate chief of staff for research at the Iowa City VA Medical Center.

This new strategy, Wray says, may be implemented this fall. But some VA-funded scientists aren’t waiting to see the details; they have flooded congressional offices with letters and phone calls warning of terrible consequences. The campaign appears to have had an impact: On 20 June, Democratic members of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations called for a hearing to provide a “thorough review” of the VA’s research reform agenda. The committee will decide soon whether or not to take a look.

—JENNIFER COUZIN

ARCHAEOLOGY

Afghani Restoration Lags; Looting Proceeds Apace

The plight of Afghanistan’s rich cultural heritage has been overshadowed by the extensive news coverage of Iraqi antiquities. But the situation there is no less dire. More than 18 months after a coalition of Afghan and U.S. forces deposed the Taliban regime, the country’s ancient sites are being looted at an alarming rate, and its premier museum remains roofless. Some help is on the way, according to a senior Afghan official who visited the United States last week, but much more is needed. “Reconstruction is going very, very slowly,” says Omar Khan Masudi, director of the National Museum in Kabul.

Afghanistan is one of the world’s most important centers of archaeology, reflecting the country’s strategic location at the crossroads of several ancient civilizations (Science, 8 November 2002, p. 1195). But 2 decades of war, capped by a deliberate campaign of destruction by the Taliban, have left little of its ancient heritage intact. At a May 2002 meeting in Kabul, a host of nations pledged to help rebuild the National Museum, which was sacked and bombed during the 1990s before the Taliban wrecked some of what was left of its 100,000-item collection. UNESCO repaired and replaced some windows last winter, dug a well, and provided a large electric generator, and the British Museum donated money for a new restoration laboratory that opened in February.

The Greek government, however, has come through with only a small slice of a promised $750,000, and several other countries also remain in arrears.

Exposed. Kabul’s National Museum still lacks a roof, while this previously unknown, 1-meter-high head of Athena, looted from Ai Khanum, turned up in Pakistan.

Last month the U.S. government donated $100,000 to correct structural defects at the museum. “Water seepage has caused damage to the recent repair work,” says Jim Williams, a UNESCO cultural heritage officer in Kabul who says that structural problems must be addressed before the roof can be replaced. Archaeologists are eager to have the restoration done quickly because the museum is the sole repository of national artifacts. Masudi and others eventually want to move the collection to a safer location in the center of the city.

Speaking last week at the World Archaeological Congress in Washington, D.C., Masudi says that the Afghan government has recovered 416 of 70,000 objects stolen from the museum. Specialists are painstakingly restoring dozens of Buddhas and other sculptures that were smashed because they were deemed contrary to Koranic law.

Outside Kabul, work will begin next month to stabilize the rock niches that once held the towering Buddhist statues of Bamiyan. A 5-year, $1.8 million grant from Japan will be used to rescue endangered wall paintings as well as to consolidate the areas blasted by Taliban ordnance. Italian and Swiss money will be used this summer to stabilize the remote Minaret of Jam as well as the fifth minaret in the Musalla Complex in Herat, both masterpieces of Islamic architecture.

But these few scattered rescue efforts can’t stem the widespread looting of ancient sites. “Illicit digging, if anything, is increasing,” says Osmund Bopearachchi, director of CNRS’s archaeological research center in Paris. Through contacts in the Peshawar bazaar in Pakistan and among dealers and collectors, Bopearachchi has assembled evidence that ancient coins, manuscripts, and statues are being looted in large quantities from known sites such as Ai Khanum in the north and ancient cities such as Kharwa, a vast Buddhist city that has yet to be legally excavated. UNESCO’s Williams estimates that the illegal revenues from the antiquities trade may rival or even surpass opium sales.

“Kindly help our country to return back our stolen pieces,” Masudi pleaded with his colleagues last week. But the forces allied against him—the greed of the warlords, the widespread poverty, and the foreign demand for ancient objects—are so far winning the battle.

—ANDREW LAWLER