Manmohan

Indian PM

IANS, New Delhi

becomes third

longest-serving

Manmohan Singh has become

the third longest-serving prime minister of India as he completed

India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru tops the list at

6,130 days, while his daughter Indira Gandhi remains the second

longest-serving prime minister with 5,829 days in office.

tions for the day. The prime minis-

ter is following his routine schedule,' an official in the Prime

Minister's Office (PMO), who declined to be identified, told IANS.

related to his office are the anniversaries of the UPA (United Progressive

Alliance) government.

official added.

over three terms.

1998-2004.

'The main functions he celebrates

They are all well publicised func-

Manmohan Singh, 77, moved to the third slot Wednesday, replacing

his predecessor Atal Bihari Vajpayee,

who had been in office for 2,272 days

13 days in 1996 and for 2,256 days in

the second and third terms during

Vajapyee was prime minister for

tions attended by UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi and other leaders,' the

'There are no special celebra-

2,273 days in office yesterday.

INTERNATIONAL

Russian fires hit Chernobyl land

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday admitted wildfires hit hundreds of hectares of land contaminated by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster as anger grew over the slack official response to its worst ever heat wave.

The smog from the wildfires that triggered a public health crisis which descended for days over Moscow dissipated as the authorities claimed the total area on fire in Russia had halved over the last 24 hours.

But concerns remained over the environment in the Bryansk region bordering Ukraine and Belarus, whose soil is still contaminated by the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, as the authorities acknowledged the area had been hit by the fires.

The Roslesozashchita state forest watchdog said in a statement on its website that according to data from August 6, in the Bryansk region alone 28 fires covering an area of 269 hectares were recorded on the radioactive lands.

Some officials had previously denied the existence of any fires in the region. "There are maps of the (nuclear) contamination, there are

maps of the fires. Anyone can put the two together. Why deny this information?" a Roslesozashchita official told the Interfax news agency reported.

But the watchdog's deputy director Alexei Bobrinsky told AFP: "There is no reason for panic."

Gennady Onishchenko, head of Russia's health protection agency, also urged against panic.

"There is pollution in the northwest of the Bryansk region but it's background contamination and there was a fire outbreak only in one area," he told the Echo of Moscow radio. The total area enflamed by wildfires in central Russia had

fallen by half since Tuesday, but there were still hundreds of wildfires raging, the emergencies ministry said. Fires covering an area of 92,700 hectares (more than 350

square miles) were blazing in Russia, almost half of Tuesday's figure of 174,000 hectares, it said in a statement.



South Korean elderly women (front, yellow uniforms), who were forced to serve as sex slaves, or so called "comfort women", for Japanese troops during World War II, and supporters stage a weekly protest urging the Japanese government to fully compensate them outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul yesterday. Japan's government on August 10 issued a fresh apology for the country's past colonial rule of the Korean peninsula, ahead of the August 29 centenary of the annexation as Tokyo eyes stronger Seoul ties.

charges filed against Indonesian cleric

Terrorism

AP, Jakarta

Indonesia's best-known radical cleric was charged yesterday with helping plan terrorist attacks in the world's most populous Muslim nation a crime that carries a maximum penalty of death, police said.

Abu Bakar Bashir was arrested Monday for allegedly setting up a terror cell and militant training camp in Aceh province that was plotting high-profile assassinations and bloody attacks on foreigners in the capital.

Investigators complied a strong case against the fiery 71-year-old cleric by monitoring his bank records, tapping phones and compiling confes-

Iraq needs

US military

until 2020:

Army chief

The Iraqi army will require

American support for another

decade before it is ready to

handle the country's security

on its own, Iraq's army chief of

Babaker Zebari said Iraq's

politicians had to find a way to

"fill the void" after American

troops withdraw from the

country at the end of next year

under a bilateral security pact.

drawal (of US forces) is going

well, because they are still

after 2011; the politicians must

find other ways to fill the void

after 2011, because the army

will be fully ready in 2020.

"But the problem will start

here," Zebari said.

"At this point, the with-

Lieutenant General

staff told AFP yesterday.

AFP, Baghdad

GAZA FLOTILLA PROBE

Israeli army chief backs use of live fire

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli armed forces chief Gabi Ashkenazi yesterday defended his troops' use of lethal fire when they stormed a Gazabound aid flotilla in May, killing nine pro-Palestinian activists.

Giving sworn testimony to a fivemember Israeli commission of inquiry, Ashkenazi said the naval commandos who rappelled onto the deck of the ship only opened fire after a soldier was shot by one of the activists.

"Today it is clear to us that as soon as the first soldier had descended to the ship, a second soldier was shot," he told the panel in a public session of the hearing. "The soldiers opened fire only where necessary."

He said that the wounded man returned fire at his attacker, despite having been hit in the stomach.

"He simply pulled out his gun and shot the shooter," Ashkenazi said.

He rejected Turkish charges that some of the dead had been shot "executionstyle" at point-blank range, saying that shots had been fired at close range as part of a life or death struggle.

"There was an instance when a soldier was being attacked with an axe," he said. "Somebody with an axe...that is lifethreatening."

No guns were found aboard the ship but the military has previously said that activists seized at least one firearm from the soldiers during the clashes.

Ashkenazi said that ballistics tests carried out on spent ammunition retrieved from the scene indicated that the activists had at least one firearm of their own but had likely thrown it overboard.

The general's testimony on the May 31 operation, in which eight Turkish and one US-Turkish activist were killed, follows that of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday and Defence Minister Ehud Barak on Tuesday.

The deadly naval raid sparked an international outcry and severely strained relations with Israel's once-close Muslim ally Turkey. It also led Israel to ease its four-year closure of Gaza to allow in all purely civilian goods.

The commission chaired by retired Israeli judge Yaakov Tirkel, which is joined by two international observers, is only mandated to look at the international legality of the raid and the blockade of the Hamas-run territory.

It will not be quizzing officials about the decision-making process.

Fonterra backs China hormone scandal

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand dairy giant Fonterra said yesterday it is "100 percent confident" in its milk supplies to a Chinese company under investigation over claims oftainted milk powder. Parents and doctors in

China's Hubei province have

expressed fears that hormones in milk powder produced by Synutra International have caused young girls to develop breasts prematurely. Synutra said the question-

able milk powder was all imported from New Zealand.

Fonterra confirmed in a statement that it supplied milk powder to Synutra, but said it was nottheonlysupplier.

"Fonterra is a supplier of milk powder to Synutra International but we understand Synutra sources some milk locally and imports whey powder from Europe," the statement said.

HARIRI MURDER CASE

UN court urges submission of 'evidence'

AFP, Beirut

A UN tribunal probing the murder of Lebanese ex-premier Rafiq Hariri yesterday called for the submission of all "relevant evidence," days after Hezbollah unveiled data allegedly implicating

"The office of the prosecutor has always invited and continues to invite anyone who has evidence relevant to the attack against former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri to bring it to its attention," tribunal spokeswoman Fatima Issawi told AFP.

The tribunal prosecutor "has also said that any allegation that is based on credible elements... will be carefully considered," she added.

Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah on Monday unveiled "evidence" that his arch-foe Israel was behind the February 14, 2005 bombing that killed Hariri and 22 others in Beirut.

Nasrallah produced several undated clips of aerial views of various areas in Lebanon, including the site of the Hariri assassination in mainly Sunni west Beirut several years prior to the murder.

He said the footage was intercepted from unmanned Israeli MK surveillance drones.

Blast kills

A woman cries over the dead body of her child wrapped in blankets amid the rubble of landslide devastation in Zhouqu yesterday in northwest China's Gansu province. Hopes of finding survivors of China's worst mudslides in decade is fading away. More than 10,000 soldiers and rescuers combed through the mountains of mud that buried the remote area at the weekend, but 72 hours after the disaster, the window of survival was quickly closing.

Death toll in China landslides rises to 1,117

AP, Zhouqu

Heavy rains yesterday lashed a remote section of northwestern China as the death toll from weekend flooding that triggered massive landslides jumped to 1,117 and the hopes of finding more survivors faded.

At least 627 people were still missing, the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported Wednesday night, citing local officials. The National Meteorological Center warned there was a

"relatively large" chance of more landslides in the coming days, as the rain was expected to grow heavier, with up to 3 1/2 inches (90 millimetres) forecast for Friday. The chances of finding more survivors were falling by the

hour, although soldiers on Wednesday rescued a 50-year-old man who had been trapped in knee-deep mud on the second floor of a hotel, Xinhua reported.

But troops and rescue teams, joined by traumatized survivors, were turning to recovering bodies and seeing to the needs of the living. Clean drinking water was a primary concern, with most local sources destroyed or too polluted to use.

Entire communities in Gansu province's Zhouqu district were swallowed up when the debris-choked Bailong River jumped its banks Sunday, releasing wave after wave of mud and rubble-strewn water. While torrential rains were the direct cause, tree cutting that left the dry hills exposed and the weakening of cliff faces by a massive 2008 earthquake were seen as

contributing factors. Buildings were torn from their foundations, their lower floors blown out by the force of the debris-laden water. Three villages comprising hundreds of households were entirely buried and much of the county seat left submerged.

eight Iraqi soldiers **BBC ONLINE**

Eight Iraqi soldiers were killed when a house they were preparing to raid blew up in Iraq's northern Diyala province.

The early morning explosion happened in Sadiya, 100km (60 miles) north-east of Diyala's capital Baquba, police said.

It comes a day after six people were killed in attacks across the country, including two members of an antiinsurgent group and two policemen.

Violence has spiked in recent weeks, ahead of a major withdrawal of US troops due to be completed this month. Iraq is also grappling with a

five-month-long political impasse after a March parliamentary poll failed to produce

a clear winner. Iraqi officials say a gunman

opened fire from a house near an Iraqi army checkpoint in Sadiya at around 0500 local time (0200 GMT).

KSA hopes giant clock to establish 'Mecca Time'

AFP, Mecca

Muslims around the world could be setting their watches to a new time soon when the world's largest clock begins ticking atop a soaring skyscraper in Islam's holiest city of Mecca.

Saudi Arabia hopes the four faces of the new clock, which will loom over Mecca's Grand Mosque from what is expected to be the world's second tallest building, will establish Mecca as an alternate time standard to the Greenwich meridian. The clock is targeted to

enter service with a threemonth trial period in the first week of the holy month of Ramadan on or about August 12, according to the Saudi state news agency SPA.

Prachanda ready to rejects withdraw candidacy on condition

ANI, Kathmandu

Maoist spokesperson Dina Nath Sharma has said his party chairman and prime ministerial candidate Pushpa Kamal Dahal alias Prachanda is ready to withdraw his candidacy for the prime minister post if other parties agreed to amend the Interim Constitution.

"If Nepali Congress and UML come up with a proposal to amend the Constitution we will think about withdrawing the candidacy of Prachanda," Nepal news quoted Sharma as, say-"If the game of forming and dissolving of government in the

name of majority continues, Constitution will not be drafted. Therefore if UML and Nepali Congress propose amending the Constitution we will withdraw our candidacy," he added. "Peace and constitution cannot be ensured if we engage in

making and breaking majority governments," Sharma said. The details of the amendments to the Constitution sought by

the Maoists is yet to be spelt out clearly. The previous four elections held on August 6, July 21, July 23 and August 2 had failed to elect a prime minister as both Prachanda and Nepali Congress vice chairman Ram Chandra Poudel failed to secure clear majority.

Thai court Thaksin's assets appeal

BBC ONLINE

Thailand's top court has refused to hear an appeal by ousted leader Thaksin Shinawatra against the seizure of assets worth almost \$1.5bn (£950m).

The assets were frozen in 2006 when Mr Thaksin was overthrown in a military coup, and a court ordered in February that they should be seized.

It ruled that they had been gained illegally through conflict of interest when he was prime minister. This is just one of a series of

legal battles MrThaksin faces. He has also been accused of terrorism in connection with the recent anti-government protests in Bangkok. He denies the allegations.

Myanmar opposition party threatens to shun polls

REUTERS, Myanmar

One of Myanmar's biggest political parties threatened yesterday to pull out of this year's long-awaited elections if there were signs of foul play by the ruling military in the run-up to

The Union Democracy Party (UDP) is considered one of the frontrunners in the opposition camp.

"We will try our best to make the upcoming elections free and fair. If we believe that it cannot become a free and fair one, we will decide to drop out," UDP chairman Thein Htay told Reuters.

Forty parties have registered with the military-appointed Election Commission (EC) but it has yet to decide which will be allowed to take almost half a century.

part in Myanmar's first civilian government in At least seven parties are believed to be proxies of the military, which will retain control of key ministries and enjoy a 25 percent quota

than the president.

Phyo Min Thein, a leading pro-democracy figure in Myanmar, quit as UDP chief last week and derided the election as a farce. No date has yet been set for the election.

Myanmar's opposition, both at home and in exile, is split. Some have decided to take part, seeing it as a small sign of democratic progress, others have opted for a boycott. Thu Wai, chairman of Democratic Party

(Myanmar) and a former political prisoner, said a boycott would play into the hands of the junta and give legitimacy to the regime. "If we dropped out in this situation, it

surely would make the regime very happy," he told Reuters. "We wouldn't dream of withdrawing." His view contrasts with that of detained

Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy party refused to register with the authorities in protest at what it called "unjust" election laws. It has since been dissolved.

of parliamentary seats under a new constitu-The party won the 1990 election by a landtion. The armed forces chief will be more senior slide, but was never allowed to rule.