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MONTHLY REPORT

March 2021

Health Access

Barriers for patients in the occupied Palestinian territory

 **7,743**

referrals issued to access health facilities outside the Palestinian MoH

1,832 Gaza

5,815 West Bank

 **66%**

of Gaza patient permit applications approved

42%

of Gaza companion permit applications approved

 **77%**

of West Bank patient permit applications approved

71%

of West Bank companion permit applications approved

 **6**

Gaza patients called for security interrogation.

A patient companion arrested at Erez checkpoint

IN FOCUS

Barriers to health care access in the Jordan Valley, West Bank

Part 1 Referrals

March Referrals by the Ministry of Health

In March, the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 7,743 referrals to health care services delivered by non-MoH providers. West Bank referrals comprised 75% (5,815) of all MoH referrals, including 913 referrals for patients from East Jerusalem. Gaza referrals accounted for 24% (1,832) of the total, while Gaza's population comprises approximately 40% of the overall population in the oPt. The origin of 96 (1%) of referrals was not reported.


Referrals for the Gaza Strip continued to increase, but still represented a 27% reduction on the monthly number of referrals issued for the first quarter of 2020. West Bank referrals, meanwhile, continue at numbers higher than those issued before the outbreak of COVID-19 in the oPt.

Palestinian MoH referrals to hospitals in the West Bank, outside East Jerusalem, were less than half (46%) of all referrals in March; referrals to East Jerusalem hospitals represented close to two-fifths (39%) of the total; referrals within the Gaza Strip 5% (a decrease from 8% in 2020); to Israeli hospitals 5%; to Egypt 5%; and to Jordan 0.3% (23).

The top needed specialties for referrals were oncology (31%); urology & nephrology (7%); cardiac catheterization (6%); ophthalmology (6%); cardiology (5%); radiotherapy (4%); and (3%) each for haematology, paediatrics, medical imaging and orthopaedics. The remaining 29% were for 23 other medical specialties.

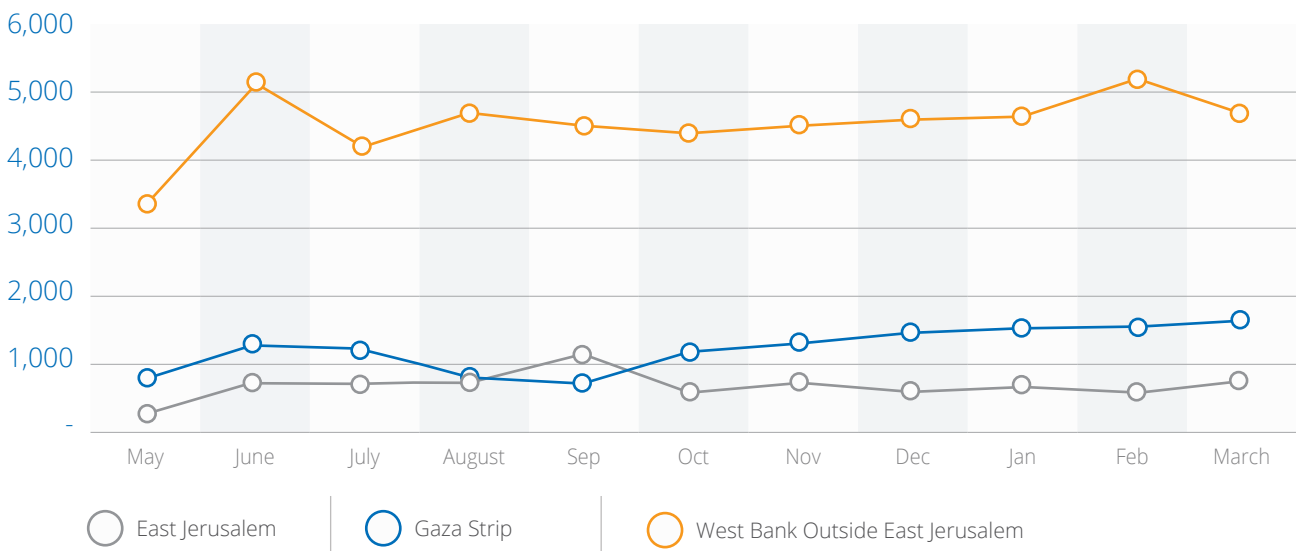
Referrals for patients under 18 years of age comprised 20% (1,553) of the total, while 28% (2,156) were for those aged 60 years or older. Referrals for female patients comprised 46% of the total.

 **1,832**
Gaza Strip

 **5,815**
West Bank

referrals approved financial coverage for healthcare outside the Palestinian Ministry of Health

Chart 1 Number of referrals issued by the Palestinian MoH by place of origin, May 2020 to March 2021



Part 2 Access

The Gaza Strip

There were 1,293 (M: 681; F: 612) patient permit applications for patients from the Gaza Strip to the Israeli authorities in March 2021. A quarter (24%) were for children under 18 and a fifth (20%) were for patients aged 60 years or older. 47% were for female patients, while 88% were for referrals funded by the Palestinian MoH. Two-thirds (66%) of applications to cross Beit Hanoun/Erez were for appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, more than a fifth (22%) for West Bank hospitals outside East Jerusalem, 12% for Israeli hospitals and 3 applications for hospitals in Jordan. Nearly three-fifths (58%) of applications were for appointments at either Augusta Victoria Hospital (42%) or Makassed Hospital (16%), both in East Jerusalem. The top five specialties accounted for 77% of permit applications: oncology (46%); ophthalmology (9%); haematology (9%); cardiology (7%); and paediatrics (6%). The remaining 23% of applications were for 21 other specialties.

Approved permit applications: 853 (M: 427; F: 426) or 66% of the 1,293 patient applications to cross Beit Hanoun/Erez in March 2021 were approved, 9% less than the average approval rate of the previous two month (75%) and 2% less than the average approval rate for 2020 (68%). Half (50%) of the approved applications were female patients; more than a fifth (25%) were for children under 18; and close to a quarter (24%) for patients aged 60 years or older.

 **1,293**
patients applications
to Israeli authorities to cross Erez/
Beit Hanoun to access healthcare

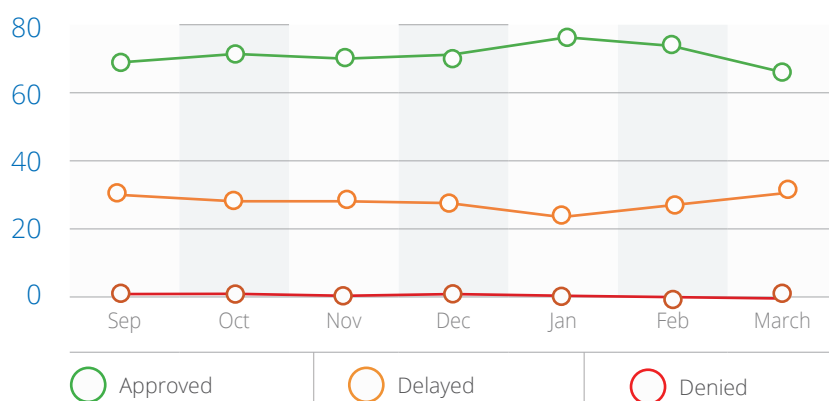
 **66%**
approved

 **0.5%**
denied

 **33.5%**
delayed

Chart 2

Israeli responses to Gaza patient permit applications, September 2020 to March 2021 (%)



Denied care: 6 patients (M: 4; F: 2) or 0.5% of the total applications were denied permits to cross Erez to reach healthcare in March. Those denied included a female cancer patient aged 70 years. Three had appointments for cancer care (oncology), one for ophthalmology, one for cardiology, and one for urology. Three had appointments at hospitals in the West Bank and three in East Jerusalem.

Delayed care: 434 (M: 250; F: 184) patient applications, or 34% of the total, were delayed access to care, receiving no definitive response to their application by the date of their hospital appointment. 21% (89 applications) were for children under the age of 18; 65% (283 applications) for patients aged 18-60 years and 14% (62 applications) for patients over 60 years of old. Close to two-fifths (38%) of those delayed had appointments for cancer care (oncology); 18% for ophthalmology; 7% for haematology; 6% for orthopaedics; 6% for cardiology, and 5% for paediatrics. The remaining 20% were for 15 other specialties.

Of delayed applications, 63% (275) were for appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, 24% (102) for the West Bank, 12% (54) for Israeli hospitals and 1% (3) for hospitals in Jordan. Most delayed applications (293 or 68%) were 'under study' at the time of appointment.

Security interrogation

In March, 6 (5 male; 1 female) patients between the age of 18 to 60 were requested for security interrogation by Israeli services as a prerequisite to processing their permit applications. Two patients had appointments for oncology, two for cardiology, one for orthopedics and one for internal medicine. Four of them had appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals and two in the West Bank. By the end of March, one was denied and five remained under study.

Patient companions

The Health Liaison Office in the Gaza Strip submitted 1,514 companion permit applications to Israeli authorities to accompany patients in March. These applications include parents or other companions applying to accompany children. Patients are eligible to apply to Israeli authorities for one companion to accompany them for health care outside Gaza. In March, 637 companion permit applications (42% of the total) were approved, 13 applications (1%) were denied and the remaining 864 (57%) were delayed, receiving no definitive response by the time of the patient's appointment. The companion permit approval rate in March (42%) was 5% lower than the monthly average of 47% for 2020.

A patient companion arrested at Erez checkpoint

Al Mezan Center For Human Rights reported that a 39-year-old companion of a patient from Khan Younis was arrested at the Israeli checkpoint at Beit Hanoun (Erez) on 2 March 2021. Karam was accompanying his mother Aziza (61-year-old), a cancer patient who had an appointment at Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem. Aziza had been approved for travel the night before her appointment, with Karam requested to attend for security interrogation on the same day. Karam arrived to the Israeli checkpoint with his mother in the morning of 2 March, hoping to accompany her to hospital after security interrogation. Aziza waited for her son at the checkpoint until around 3 pm, when she was told by the military personnel there that her son had been arrested. She was allowed to then cross and travel to hospital in East Jerusalem. Karam's family in Khan Younis received a phone call the next day telling them he had been detained. Karam was released on the 25 March without indictment or a trial, 23 days after he was arrested.

Patients and companions crossing Beit Hanoun/Erez

The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 888 Gaza patients and 691 companions exited through Beit Hanoun/Erez checkpoint in March to access hospitals outside the Gaza Strip. Of the 888 patients, 75 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulance with 75 companions. These numbers show that more than a fifth (22%) of patients crossed Beit Hanoun/Erez checkpoint in March without a companion. 14 bodies of deceased patients were returned to Gaza. During the month, the Israeli checkpoint was open on 26 days for daytime working hours and closed on 5 days (4 Saturdays and 1 Jewish holiday).



6

Gaza patients called for Security interrogation



1,514

companion applications

to Israeli authorities to cross Erez/Beit Hanoun to access healthcare



42%

approved



1%

denied



57%

delayed



888

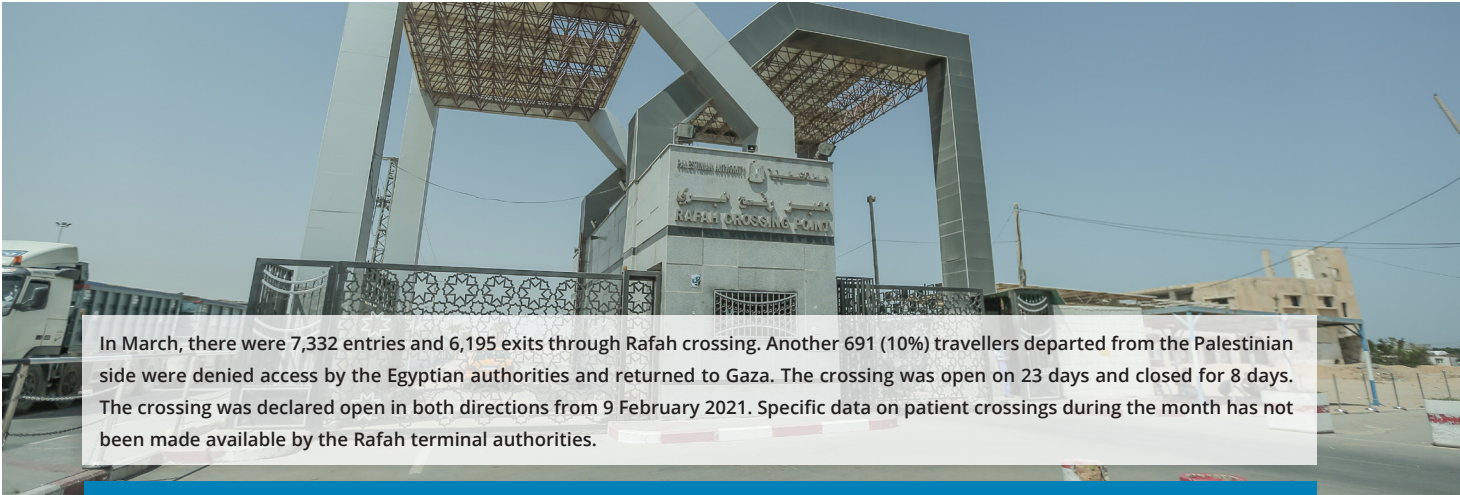
patients exited through Beit Hanoun/Erez



691

patient companions exited through Beit Hanoun/Erez

Rafah crossing - Egypt



In March, there were 7,332 entries and 6,195 exits through Rafah crossing. Another 691 (10%) travellers departed from the Palestinian side were denied access by the Egyptian authorities and returned to Gaza. The crossing was open on 23 days and closed for 8 days. The crossing was declared open in both directions from 9 February 2021. Specific data on patient crossings during the month has not been made available by the Rafah terminal authorities.

The West Bank

The Palestinian Civil Affairs Office reported 4,712 applications by West Bank patients and 5,055 applications by patient companions to Israeli authorities to reach health care in East Jerusalem and Israel in March. Restrictions on the movement of Palestinians from the West Bank to Israel and East Jerusalem are less severe for certain sections of the population. Many women older than 50 years of age and men older than 55 years of age, as well as children under 13 years traveling with an approved adult, are exempted from the requirement to obtain a permit to travel – provided they are not traveling on a Saturday, before 8am or after 7pm. Lockdown restrictions have additionally affected accessibility from the West Bank to East Jerusalem and Israel since the outbreak of COVID-19.


Of 4,712 West Bank patient applications, 3,636 (77%) were approved, 852 (18%) were unsuccessful (denied) and 224 (5%) were pending reply at the time of monthly reporting. Of the 5,055 West Bank companion applications, 3,604 (71%) were approved, 1,183 (24%) were unsuccessful and 268 (5%) were pending reply at the time of monthly reporting.

 **4,712**

patient permit applications
for Israeli permits to access
healthcare in East Jerusalem and
Israel

 **77%**
approved

 **18%**
denied

 **5%**
pending at the time
of monthly reporting

 **5,055**

patient companion applications
to access healthcare in East
Jerusalem and Israel

 **71%**
approved

 **24%**
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In Focus

Barriers to health care access in the Jordan Valley, West Bank



Primary care provision at Humsa following mass demolitions

Humsa is a collection of Bedouin communities comprising around 175 people, in the north Jordan Valley in the West Bank.

Two major incidents of demolitions by Israeli forces at Humsa Al Bqai'a occurred in February 2021, where 60 people including 35 children were left displaced and at risk of forcible transfer. The community was provided tents, kitchen utensils and other essential support by humanitarian agencies. The Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) outreach team was approached by the community after the demolitions took place and has since been visiting the community to provide primary health care and women health services, along with medicines, hygiene kits, food parcels and tents to individuals and families. The mobile clinic team comprises a doctor, nurse, social worker, and driver.

The communities of Humsa are remote and in areas designated as firing zones by Israeli forces. Road access is difficult, made more hazardous by the wet conditions during the early visits in winter. There are several kilometres between each community. The nearest permanent primary health facility is some 12 to 20 km away (depending on the community), with no public transport and few cars available to make the journey.

Afaf is the social worker with the clinic. She commented, "People in this area, especially women, face a lot of pressure and difficulties. Their basic needs are not being met. Women have to cross over hills to bring the water they need." Afaf provides health promotion and awareness services for the women, focused on areas such as nutrition in pregnancy and child health. "Although we strive to provide health services and support, the difficulties with access for the communities and the severe restrictions on development of infrastructure for basic necessities like water, housing and electricity affect the health of the communities badly. Some families have been divided so that the children can attend schools, which are closer for some communities than others."

Humsa Al Bqai'a has been subject to [four mass demolitions/confiscations](#) since 2014, affecting homes as well as structures for water, hygiene, sanitation, and agriculture. Demolitions and restricted planning in Area C of the West Bank impact on community health by affecting access to affordable clean water, and in turn livelihoods, poverty, and food security. Rural Palestinian communities in the Jordan Valley experience higher rates of stunting and childhood malnutrition¹. Community mental health meanwhile is affected by the situation of precarity that arise from insecurity of housing and exposure to high levels of violence.

¹ PNIPH, 2017. *Malnutrition in the Jordan Valley: Evidence of an impending health crisis*

Zubaidat: Maintaining primary care provision during COVID-19

33-year-old Amani is a mother of three and nurse who works with a mobile clinic team of the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS). She has been working with the team for the past four years, providing primary care services to underserved and remote Palestinian communities in Area C, which comprises approximately 60% of the West Bank that remains under Israeli civil and military control. The area has been the focus of Israeli settlement expansion, with accompanying severe restrictions on Palestinian development of infrastructure. Restrictions affect the development of permanent or semi-permanent health facilities, placing dependence on mobile clinic teams for provision of essential health services. However, access can be unpredictable and precarious, a situation that has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the communities served by the PRCS mobile clinic that Amani works for is Az-Zubaidat village in the Jericho governorate of the central Jordan Valley. The community experienced an outbreak of COVID-19 in September 2020, but the clinic continued to provide its essential services.

Amani stated, "It's true we were extremely scared, but our fear didn't prevent us from providing our service to the fullest extent. People in the community were very thankful to us for the effort. They felt they were not alone during this time, and we were the only organisation in the area able to maintain our services. To this day we have continued. The weather in September was really hot. After the visit when we would take off the protective gear and all our clothes would be wet. Still we were happy we provided the service."

The clinic provides screening services, medical consultations, women's health services, and women's education and empowerment activities. Amani is also involved in home visits to women who have just given birth, to carry out check-ups on mother and baby. During COVID-19, the clinic provided additional services including health promotion and awareness, provision of hygiene kits, and COVID-19 screening services. The team would answer the questions of community member and explain to them the symptoms of COVID-19 and where to seek assistance or medical help.

A difficulty of health care provision during this period has been the stigma towards health care workers, including comments Amani endured from other colleagues and family members for continuing to visit affected areas. "When other colleagues would come to the mobile clinic office, they would automatically wear their mask before coming close to us. They kept telling us to be careful as they were worried. Distant family also commented about my work as they were scared I would bring the virus home."

With restrictions of movement and closure of schools many working mothers were asked to take days off to be able to spend time with their children. Amani wasn't able to take a single day of annual leave during 2020 and spent all her time providing support to families served by the clinic. While she was at work, Amani's family, including her aunts and grandparents, helped with childcare.

"People know about the Palestine Red Crescent Society and the services we provide. We didn't stop visiting our communities for a single day. When you provide a service and see people's appreciation for your work, you realize it is important and you forget your fears. You want to help more. I knew that these people needed our help, and we were the only organisation able to visit them during that time."