



Patients and their family members waiting for their Israeli permits to be confirmed before beginning the procedures of leaving Gaza at Erez crossing, December 2015. ©WHO

## Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 12 (Feb. 15, 2016)

### Summary: December 2015

#### Erez crossing

- **Approval rate for patients' permits the lowest in 7 years:** Of 1,801 patient applications submitted for permits to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in December, 67.24% were approved. Approval rates have dropped considerably since May 2015 (17%). Seventy-seven patients (4.28%), including 9 children and 1 person over 60 years, were denied and 513 patients (28.48%), including 147 children and 51 elderly people over 60, received no response to their applications (Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza).
- **Arrests:** A 28-year-old health professional with a valid permit was arrested at Erez crossing on his way to a training in the West Bank. He was held for 25 before being released (*see p. 6*).

#### Rafah exit

- **Rafah border:** Rafah border terminal was open on 2 days only during December. In 2015, the border has been opened a total of only 26 days, allowing only 178 patients of the 1,670 patients with Ministry of Health referrals to Egypt to cross for health care. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents, the majority of whom were private patients, to cross through Rafah monthly for health-related reasons.

#### Ministry of Health Referrals in December

- Ministry of Health referred **1,975 patients** in December to outside care with an estimated cost of **NIS 9,149,795**.

## REFERRALS

### Referrals of Gaza patients<sup>1</sup>

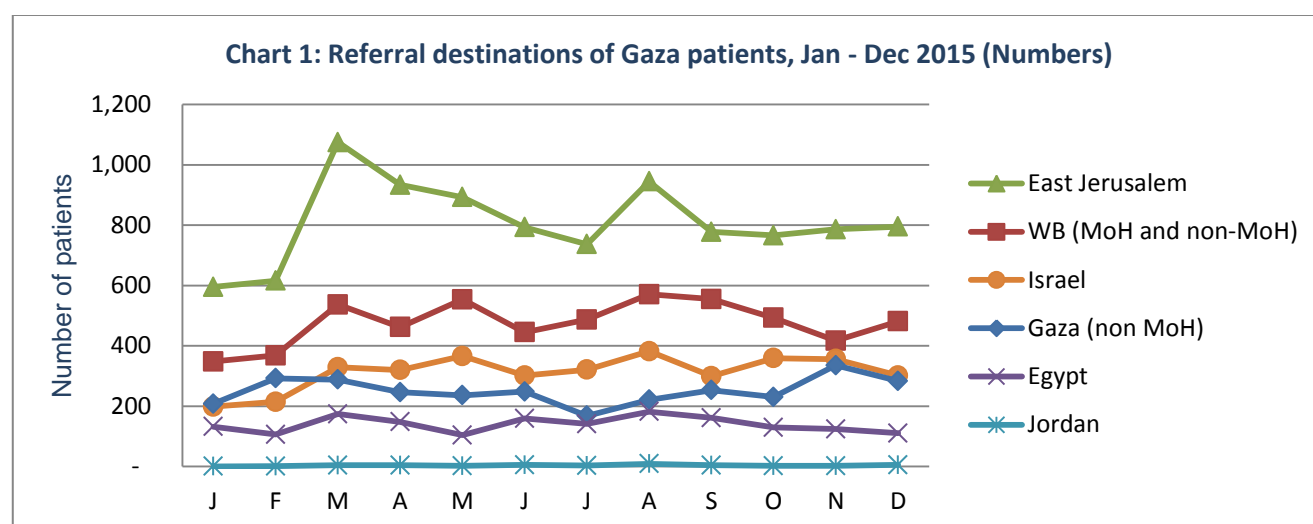
The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,975 referrals<sup>1</sup> for Gaza patients in December, according to the Medical Referral Directorate data in Ramallah (**Table 1**), similar to the monthly average in 2015. Referrals to non-MoH facilities in Gaza were 13% and to Israeli hospitals 3% higher than the monthly average of 2015. Referrals to East Jerusalem hospitals were 2% and to Egypt 3% lower than the monthly average. December referrals to the West Bank hospitals were the average of 2015. 5 patients were referred to Jordan in December while the monthly average in 2015 is 3. (**Table 1** and **Chart 1**).

In December, 46% of referrals issued for Gaza patients were for females while 54% were for males. 28% of all referrals were for children under the age of 18 while 21% were for elderly patients over 60 years old. 87% of all referrals were for hospital admissions while the rest (13%) were for outpatient clinics.

**Table 1: Palestinian MoH referrals by destination, January to December 2015**

Referral Destination	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec	TOTAL
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	208	292	288	246	236	248	168	221	253	230	335	283	<b>3,008</b>
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	348	368	537	462	554	445	487	571	555	493	417	481	<b>5,718</b>
East Jerusalem	595	616	1,075	934	893	793	737	945	778	766	786	795	<b>9,713</b>
Jordan	0	1	4	4	2	5	3	9	4	2	2	5	<b>41</b>
Israel	198	214	329	320	366	301	321	382	299	359	356	301	<b>3,746</b>
Egypt	132	106	174	148	104	159	141	182	161	129	124	110	<b>1,670</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,481</b>	<b>1,597</b>	<b>2,407</b>	<b>2,114</b>	<b>2,155</b>	<b>1,951</b>	<b>1,857</b>	<b>2,310</b>	<b>2,050</b>	<b>1,979</b>	<b>2,020</b>	<b>1,975</b>	<b>23,896</b>

Source: MoH Medical Referral Directorate, Ramallah, January 14, 2016.<sup>1</sup>



Of the 1,975 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in December, 1,582 (80%) depended on obtaining Israeli permits for access through Erez checkpoint and 110 (5.6%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and required the Rafah border to be accessible).

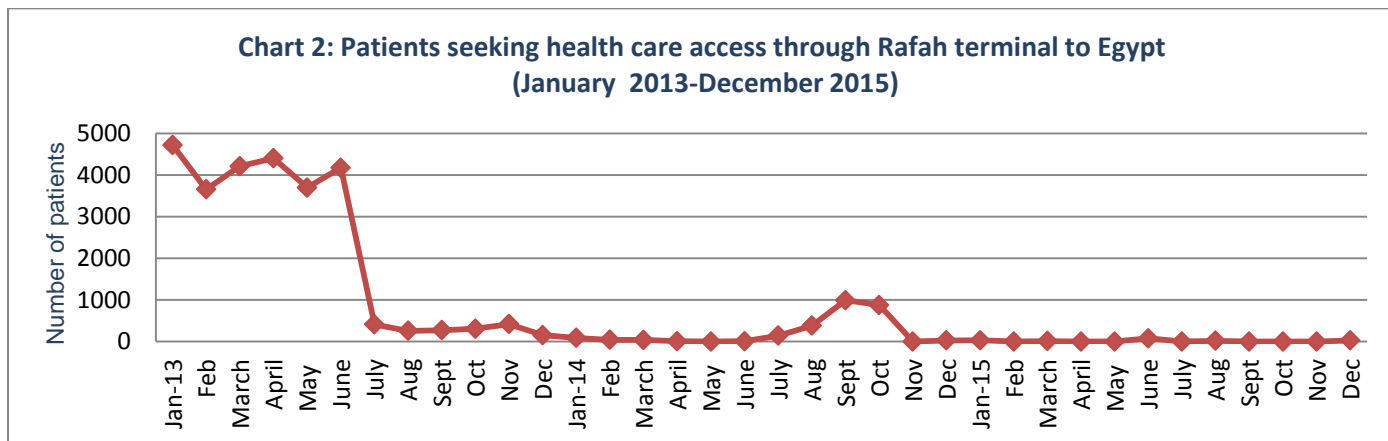
<sup>1</sup> Referral data used in the WHO monthly reports since October 2015 reflect the financial decision-based data for Gaza patients, as received from the MoH Medical Referral Directorate in Ramallah, rather than the number of unique patients. The data include renewals of referrals for Gaza patients to Egypt who are still waiting for access through Rafah, approvals for additional financial coverage needed for in-patients in hospital, and special additional referrals; numbers are therefore higher than the patient-based data from the Gaza referral office previously used in the monthly reports. The data have been adjusted in the tables below so that trends can be evaluated. Since 2010, WHO's annual reports are based on data from the MoH Medical Referral Directorate in Ramallah.

The RAD in Ramallah reported an estimated cost of **NIS 9,149,795** for the 1,975 referrals for Gaza patients in December.

### Access through Rafah terminal

**Two days access to Egypt during December:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, Rafah border terminal was open only for 2 days in December, allowing 1,558 travellers to exit towards Egypt, among them 30 patients (25 of them were transferred by ambulance and 5 as regular travellers). No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza during the month.

During the year, the crossing was open on only 26 days for humanitarian cases, allowing only 178 patients to cross into Egypt for health care. On another 6 days, the terminal was open only for return, allowing travellers from Gaza who had been stranded in Egypt to enter to Gaza. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah monthly for health-related reasons (**Chart 2**).

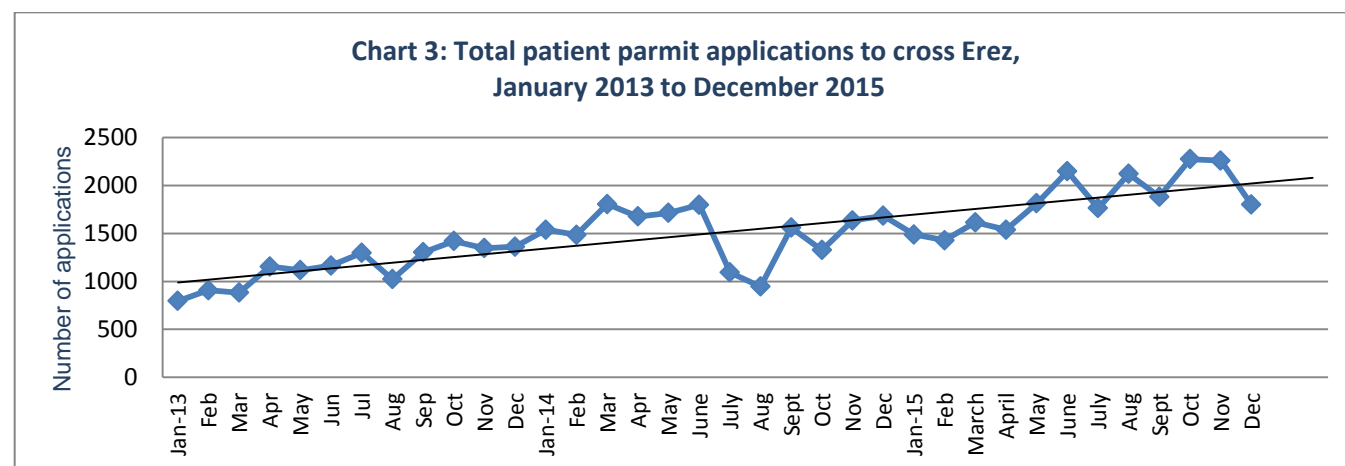


### Access through Erez

In December, there were 1,801 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care (53.03% males and 46.97% females). 30.21% were applications for children under 18 years and 16.99% were for elderly people above 60. Applications submitted this month were mainly for patients who need health care in oncology 469 (26%), cardiology 168 (9.33%), orthopedics 161 (8.94%), ophthalmology 151 (8.38%), pediatrics 144 (8%), hematology 124 (6.89%), and neurosurgery 116 (6.44%).

Of the total permit applications, 913 (50.69%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, 473 (26.26%) to the West Bank, 400 (22.21%) to Israel, and 15 (0.83%) to Jordan. The top receiving hospitals in December were Makassed 453 (25.15%), Augusta Victoria 307 (17.05%), Annajah university 195 (10.83%), Tel-Hashomir 133 (7.38%), Hadassa Ein Karem 101 (5.61%) and St. John's Eye 100 (5.55%).

The total number was a 20% drop from the previous month. In the past 3 years (**Chart 3**) there has been a trend toward higher demand on access to health care through Erez due to blocked access to Egypt, especially for private patients and due to lack of resources in the health system in Gaza.



The process of applying for a permit is time-consuming and complicated, and sometimes requires multiple attempts which delays health care. The patient must have a valid financial commitment from the Palestinian MoH and documentation of an appointment from the receiving hospital. If the validity of either expires before the patient receives a permit, the application process must be repeated. Patients also sometimes reapply after they are denied a permit or if no response is received and the treatment is urgent. December data showed that out of the 1,801 applications submitted in the Palestinian coordination office, 186 (10.33%) applications were repeated attempts.

In December, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported that 1,211 (67.24%) applications for permits for patients were approved (**Table 2**), the lowest approval rate since May 2009. 77 applicants (4.28%) were denied access. 513 (28.48%) did not receive an answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care, the highest delay rate since September 2009.

According to the Palestinian Coordination office head, some delay may be due to a personnel change in the Israeli officer in charge of patient permits and soldiers working in the coordination system. The recent Israeli decision to expand security interviews to patients' companions up to age 55 may also affect permits of patients, especially for parents of sick children. He also reported that ambulance coordination has taken much longer in recent months.

Permit applications should be submitted to the Israeli district liaison office 7-10 days prior to the hospital appointment date but in December, out of the total 1,801 applications from patients with hospital appointments scheduled during the month, 320 (17.77%) were submitted less than a week before the referral hospital appointment date, 821 (45.59%) applications were submitted 8-14 days before the appointment, 627 (34.81%) were 15-30 days before, and 33 (1.83%) were more than 30 days before the hospital appointment.

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	82	129	66	91	1	1	15	37	0	0
4 - 17	147	186	100	131	3	4	44	51	2	1
18- 40	213	282	137	142	9	33	67	107	7	23
41 - 60	255	201	176	114	9	16	70	71	13	12
Over 60	149	157	127	127	0	1	22	29	0	3
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>846</b>	<b>955</b>	<b>606</b>	<b>605</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,801</b>		<b>1,211 (67.24%)</b>		<b>77 (4.28%)</b>		<b>513 (28.48%)</b>		<b>61 (3.39%)</b>	

\* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH –Gaza

Total patient permit applications in December 2015 were 7% higher than the corresponding month in 2014 while the approval rate was 14.65% lower and denial rate was 0.96% higher than in December 2014. Comparing applications in 2015 to those in 2014, applications were 21.2% higher, approval rate was 5% lower and denial rate was double in 2015 than in 2014 (**Table 3**).

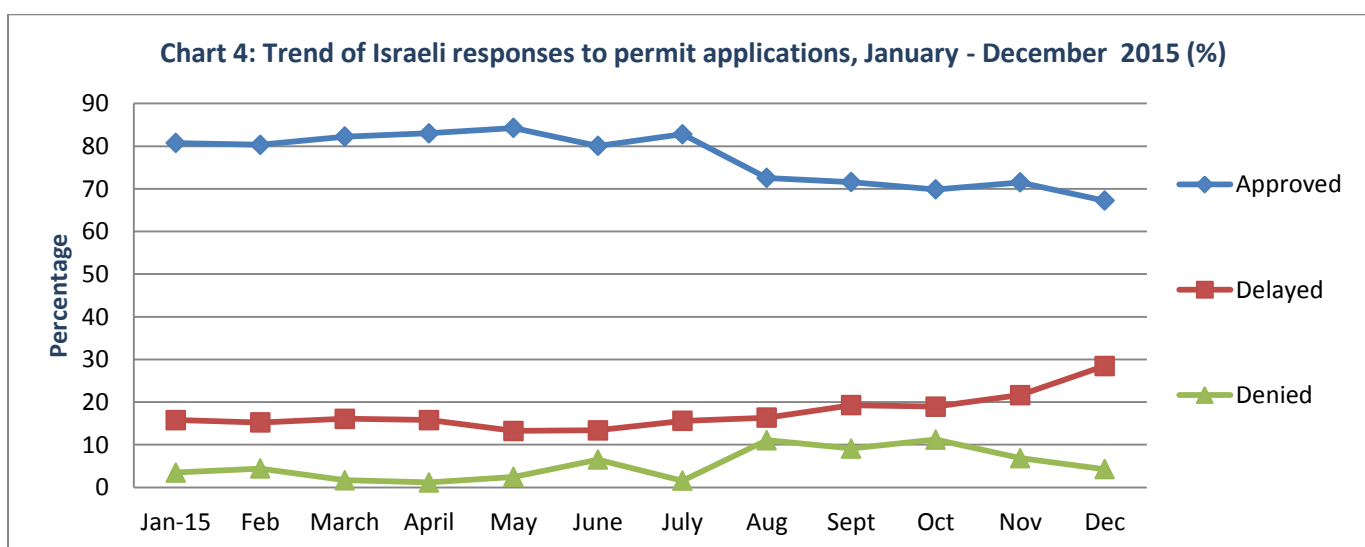
Period	December 2014		December 2015		January-December 2014		January-December 2015	
	Total		Total		Total		Total	
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,684</b> (F:760; M:924)		<b>1,801</b> (F:846; M:955)		<b>18,266</b> (F:8,301; M:9,965)		<b>22,138</b> (F:10,315; M:11,823)	
Approved	1,379 (F:651; M:728)	81.89%	1,211 (F:606; M:605)	67.24%	14,921 (F:7,124; M:7,797)	81.69%	16,970 (F:8,389; M:8,581)	76.66%
Denied	56 (F:20; M:36)	3.32%	77 (F:22; M:55)	4.28%	528 (F:176; M:352)	2.89%	1,267 (F:403; M:864)	5.72%
Delayed	249 (F:89; M:160)	14.79%	513 (F:218; M:295)	28.48%	2,817 (F:1,001; M:1,816)	15.42%	3,901 (F:1,523; M:2,378)	17.62%
<b>-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)</b>	<b>20</b> (F:1; M:19)	<b>1.19%</b>	<b>61</b> (F:22; M:39)	<b>3.39%</b>	<b>179</b> (F:21; M:158)	<b>0.98%</b>	<b>230</b> (F:60; M:170)	<b>1.04%</b>

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Patient companions:** In December, 1,858 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. Only 58.93% were approved, 10.5% lower than the average for the year 2015. 4.25% were denied and 36.82% were pending. Only one first-degree relative is permitted and permits are now conditional on security interviews for those aged up to 55 years. Hindering access for parents to accompany their sick children in effect delays medical care to children.

**Financial coverage:** 91.95% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in December were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.89% were self-funded, 1.78% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1.78% by Peres Center for Peace, 0.78% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.39% by the Military Medical Services, 0.06% by Hadassa fund, 0.06% by an insurance company and 0.33% by other organizations.

**Chart 4** shows a decline after July 2015 in Israeli approvals for patients' permit applications and an increase in delays. Recent delays reflect slow processing of applications by the Israeli side. The trend toward delays also affects companions' applications.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Denied care:** 77 patients (55 males; 22 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 9 children and 1 patient over 60 years old. Of the denied patients, 68 patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals and 9 in Israel. 70 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 3 were self-funded, and 4 by other government services or Israeli NGOs. Of those denied: 6.49% (5 patients) had submitted their applications less than 8 days before the hospital appointment; 35.06% (27) had waited for a response for 8-14 days; 49.35% (38) waited 15-30 days; and 9.09% (7) patients waited more than 30 days. The denied patients had appointments for neurosurgery (22), orthopedics (14), oncology (6), urology (5), internal medicine (4) and the remaining (26) patients were for 15 other specialties.

**Delayed care:** 513 patient applicants were delayed in reaching health care in December, the highest delayed number of applications since January 2008. 513 applications (295 males; 218 females), including 147 children and 51 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 513 patients delayed, 79.34% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 19.69% in Israel, and 0.97% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in oncology (123), ophthalmology (53), pediatrics (48), orthopedics (47), cardiology (46), neurosurgery (35), hematology (34), urology (22), general surgery (17), nuclear medicine (14), nephrology (14), internal medicine (12), and the remaining (48) were for 13 other specialties.

Out of 513 delayed patient applicants, 13.65% had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date. However, 48.54% waited 8-14 days, 36.45% waited 15-30 days and 1.36% waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request. 47 patients out of the delayed were eventually approved late, within the first 2 weeks of January 2016.

**Security Interviews:** 61 patients (39 males; 22 females), including 3 children under the age of 18 (1 female and 2 males), 55 aged 18-60 years (35 males; 20 females) and 3 men over 60 were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). Only 4 were approved after interviews.

**Patients and companions crossed Erez:** The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,108 Gaza patients (and 1,040 companions) crossed Erez in December to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals; of these, 86 patients were transferred by ambulance (using two ambulances and back-to-back procedures) with 86 companions. Erez crossing was open for 27 days during regular day-time working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays) in December.

#### **Health professional detained from Erez Crossing, held 25 days and released without charge**

Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights reported in December that Mohammed Abu-Jumaiza, a 28-year-old x-ray technician employed by the Palestinian Red Crescent hospital, Al-Quds, was arrested at Erez crossing on Sunday, December 13, 2015 on his way to training. He had a valid permit. Mohammed was part of a group of health professionals including physicians, nurses and technicians who were travelling to the West Bank for training on cardiac catheterization. The Abu-Jumaiza family reported to Al-Mezan that when they tried to call Mohammed in the afternoon on the same day, his phone was closed. The family contacted his friends who informed them that Mohammed was arrested. Al-Mezan opened a file for Mohammed and followed his case until December 19. Mohammed was held in detention and interrogated and eventually released on January 7, 2016, with no charges or trial.