



Patients waiting for permits at Erez crossing. Only 55% of patients who requested permits to access health care were approved in March © WHO

Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 3 (Published May 16, 2017)

Summary: March 2017

Difficult access through Gaza exits

- Young mother of two children dies after being delayed a permit repeatedly, then refused passage at Erez (See p. 4.)
• More than 45% of patients were denied/delayed permits: Of 2,626 patient applications for a permit to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in March, 1,440 (55%) were approved; 96 patients (4%) were denied permits while 1,090 (42%) received no response including 242 children aged 18 years or younger and 120 people over 60 years (Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza).
• 117 patients were denied access by the de facto authority in late March and early April (See p. 5.)
• 55% of patients' companions were denied/delayed permits: The approval rate for permit applications of patients' companions was 46%; 4% of the companions were denied permits and the remaining 50% were still pending by the patients' scheduled hospital dates.
• Security interrogations for patients: 29 patients (23 males; 6 females), including a man over 60, were requested by the General Security Services for interviews at Erez during March. Six were approved permits.

Limited access through Rafah

- Limited access to Egypt: According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open in both directions for three days only in March allowing 430 patients to travel for health reasons to Egypt.

Table 1: Humanitarian health workers access through Erez:

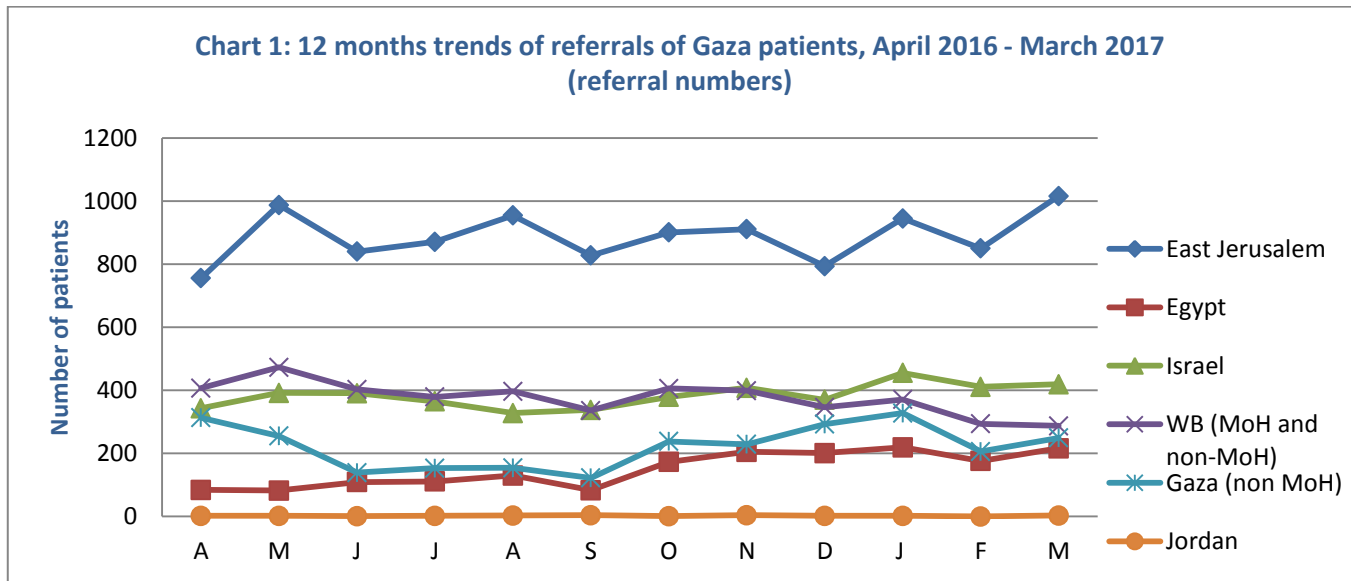
Table with 5 columns: Request, Approved, Denied, Pending. Rows include WHO for Jerusalem staff to enter, WHO for Gaza staff to exit, WHO for Health Cluster partners, International medical delegates, and Total.

Ministry of Health Referrals

Referrals and financial coverage: The Ministry of Health issued 2,190 referral decisions for 1,915 Gaza patients (47.76% female patients and 52.24% male patients) in March for outside care with an estimated cost of NIS 9,235,928. The top 5 needed specialties for Gaza patients were in oncology, hematology, heart catheterization, pediatrics and nuclear medicine (Table 2).

Table 2: Ministry of Health Referrals in March 2017*

Medical Referral	Patients	Percentage	Patients	Patients	Percentage
Oncology	633	28.90%	Ophthalmology	113	5.16%
Hematology	158	7.21%	Internal medicine	72	3.29%
Heart catheterization	157	7.17%	Cardiology	69	3.15%
Pediatrics	131	5.98%	Neurosurgery	63	2.88%
Nuclear medicine	121	5.53%	21 other specialties	556	25.39%
Orthopaedics	117	5.34%	* N = 2,190		

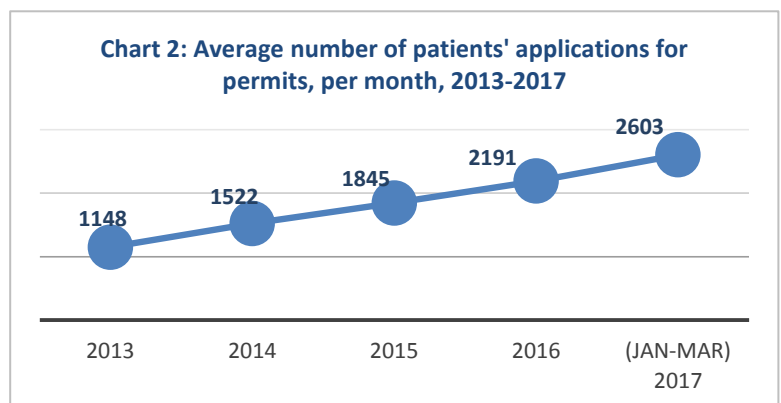


1,725 referrals (78.8%) to hospitals in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Israel and Jordan required Israeli permits for access through Erez checkpoint and 216 (9.9%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and the Rafah border to be accessible). The remaining 11.2% were to medical facilities within Gaza.

ACCESS

Rafah crossing: limited access to Egypt during March: According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open on three days during March allowing 2,212 humanitarian cases to cross, including 430 patients with 200 companions. 21 of the patients, with 17 companions, were transferred by ambulance. No medical aid or medical delegates entered Gaza during the month. In 2016, the Rafah crossing was open only 38 days for humanitarian cases, allowing a total of 1,690 patients to travel into Egypt for health care. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah terminal to Egypt monthly for health-related reasons.

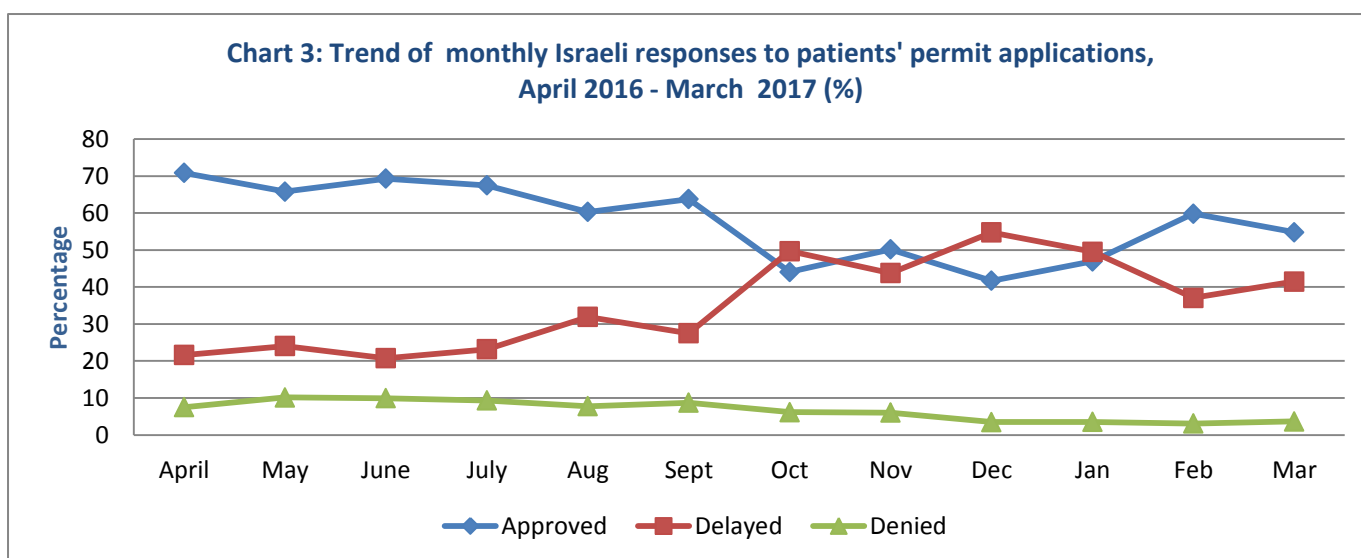
Erez crossing – drop in permit approval rates. In March, there were 2,626 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care, an increase over the monthly average in previous years (Chart 2). Part of the increase is due to repeat applications by patients who do not receive responses to previous applications and lose their medical appointments. About 26% (684) of patient exit permit requests in March were repeats after earlier requests were unanswered: five attempts for two patients, four attempts for one patient, three attempts for 14 patients, and two attempts for 314 patients. The remaining 74% (1942)



applications represented single attempts by patients during the month.

The top receiving hospitals in March were Makassed, 638 (24.3%) and Augusta Victoria, 619 (23.6%) in East Jerusalem; Hadassah, 191 (7.3%) in Israel; Najah University hospital in Nablus 184 (7%); Tel-Hashomir, 155 (5.9%) in Israel; St. John hospital, 102 (3.9%) and St. Joseph hospital, 84 (3.2%) in East Jerusalem; Ichilov hospital 81 (3.1%) in Israel; Arab care center, 63 (2.4%) in Ramallah; Assuta hospital, 58 (2.2%) in Israel; Nablus Specialized hospital, 54 (2.1%) in Nablus; Msalam center for ophthalmology, 53 (2%) in Ramallah. The remaining 344 (13%) were to 26 other hospitals and medical centers.

In March, the Palestinian District Liaison Office reported that 54.84% of applications for patients' permits were approved, 7% lower than the average in 2016, **Chart 3**. Of those not approved, 96 applicants (3.66%) were denied access, 1090 (41.5%) applications were pending and patients lost their hospital appointments, delaying their medical care. 29 patients were requested for Israeli security interviews.



Of the 2,626 patients applying for permits to cross Erez, 94% received referrals from the Ministry of Health, 3.5% were self-funded, 1.5% were supported by Noor Ala Al-alam charity and the remaining 1% by other organizations.

Denied care: 96 patients (69 males; 27 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including three children under 18 years old and nine patients over 60 years old. 52 had appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, 32 in hospitals in the West Bank and 12 in Israeli hospitals. The following specialties were needed by patients who were denied permits: orthopedics (24); oncology and ophthalmology (11) each; general surgery (7); cardiology, internal medicine and neurosurgery (6) each; ENT (5); and the remaining 20 were for 11 other specialties.

Delayed care: 1,090 patients (625 males; 465 females) experienced delays in accessing health care in March, among them 242 children and 120 patients over the age of 60; those delayed received no response to their applications and consequently lost their scheduled hospital appointments. The delayed patients (1,090) had treatment appointments in: oncology (257), ophthalmology (104), orthopedics (94), cardiology (90), pediatrics (80), neurosurgery (75), hematology (73), nuclear medicine (53), urology (36), internal medicine (34), general surgery (32), ENT (29), vascular surgery (28), nephrology (27) and the remaining 78 were for 12 other specialties.

Patients need to submit their applications at least ten days prior to the hospital appointment. In March, out of the 1,090 delayed patients about 90% submitted their applications ten days or more prior to the appointment date.

Table 3. Israeli responses to health permit requests from patients and companions via Erez crossing (%)

Month	Patients			Companions		
	Approved	Denied	Delayed	Approved	Denied	Delayed
December 2016	41.70	3.50	54.80	35.0	9.70	55.30
January 2017	46.95	3.51	53.05	38.6	5.85	61.40
February 2017	59.85	3.09	37.06	50.4	4.50	45.10
March 2017	54.84	3.66	41.50	45.5	4.10	50.40

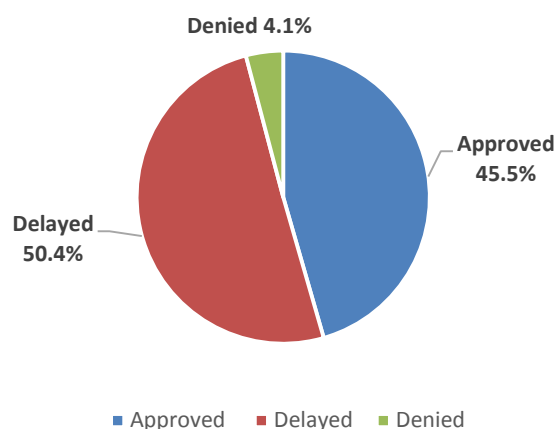
Patients' companions: In March, 2,872 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. Only one first-degree relative is permitted to accompany a Gaza patient and

permits are conditional on security clearance for all persons under the age of 55 years. Approval rates for patients' companions have declined steadily from 2012 to December 2016, when it was the lowest ever (35%). The situation slightly improved in February but declined again in March 2017. In March, 45.5% were approved, 4.1% were denied and 50.4% were still under process on the date of the patient's medical appointment, **Chart 4**.

Security interviews: 29 patients (23 males; 6 females), among them a man over 60 years, were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). Of these, six were approved after the interview. There has been a steady increase in the number of patients requested for GSS since December 2015.

Patients and companions cross Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,202 Gaza patients and 1,101 companions crossed Erez in March to access Palestinian, Israeli, or Jordanian hospitals; of these, 62 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulances, with 62 companions. Erez crossing was open for 27 days during daytime working hours and closed on four days (four Saturdays) in March.

Chart 4: Israeli responses to patients' companions exit permit applications, March 2017



Young mother dies after being delayed a permit repeatedly, then refused passage at Erez

Khoulood Alsa'aidni, a 36-year-old woman and lab technician from Al-Burij refugee camp, was diagnosed with thyroid cancer at the Gaza European hospital in April 2016. Following one chemotherapy session at Al-Rantesi Hospital, doctors in Gaza decided to refer her for treatment outside Gaza. Khoulood, a mother of two children, applied four times for an Israeli permit. Three times her request was still under study at the time of her hospital appointment, forcing her to miss appointments at Al Ahli Hospital in Hebron in December 2016 and in early January 2017 and at Augusta Victoria Hospital in late January 2017. Her fourth application for travel 22 February 2017 to Augusta Victoria Hospital was approved.



Khoulood's mother, who was accompanying her on that date, said that when they arrived to Erez, Khoulood was stopped for a security interview. She was asked by Israeli security officers to provide information on one of her relatives in return for allowing her to cross Erez. Khoulood replied that she did not have any information about the relative.

At that point, said Khoulood's mother, "We were forced by the Israeli security to return to Gaza. Altogether the travel to Erez, the waiting at the border and the security interview amounted to seven hours and Khoulood's medical condition deteriorated as a result. We returned back at Al-Rantesi Hospital in Gaza. She was suffering from dehydration and was treated with a drip solution and a dose of chemotherapy over a period of five days."

Khoulood's husband arranged to change her medical referral to Egypt and she managed the difficult trip through Rafah and Sinai to Egypt on 8 March 2017 after 3 months of delay. In a Cairo hospital, her condition continued to deteriorate and she died on 12 March 2017.

De facto authority checkpoint closure in Gaza exits hinders patients' access to outside health care

Following the killing of a Hamas activist in Gaza city by an unknown assailant on Friday, 24 March 2017, the de facto authority announced the closure of "4/4" checkpoint in Beit Hanoun, located one kilometer before the Israeli-controlled Erez crossing, effectively preventing the exit of all travelers from Gaza, including patients and their companions seeking health care. The closure began on 26 March, when 71 patients and 63 companions were returned from "4/4" checkpoint. On 27 March, the authorities opened the checkpoint for patients, but restricted exit for those patients and companions aged 15-45 years old. The closure, which was lifted on April 6, had prevented 117 patients from traveling to hospitals, including 39 oncology, 16 hematology, 9 cardiology, 8 orthopedics, 6 neurosurgery, 5 metabolic disease, and 5 neurology patients, and 29 patients in other specialties.