



The closed Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, December 2015© WHO

## Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 11 (January 20, 2016)

### Summary: November 2015

#### Erez crossing

- **Approval rate for patients' permits declines:** Of 2,260 patient applications were submitted for permits to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in November, 71.5% were approved. Approval rates have dropped 15% since May. 6.86% were denied (155 patients, including 8 children and 16 elderly patient over 60 years old) and 21.64% received no response (489 patients, including 144 children). (Source: Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza.)
- **Arrests:** A 31-year-old patient with a valid travel permit was arrested at Erez crossing on his way to his appointment at a West Bank hospital (*p. 6*).
- **Patients injured near border fence denied access permits** (*p. 6*).

#### Rafah: No exit during November

- **Rafah border:** Rafah border terminal was closed to travellers, including patients, during November. The border has been open only 24 days this year, allowing only 148 patients to cross into Egypt for health care. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah monthly for health-related reasons.

#### MoH referrals in November

- **Ministry of Health referred 2,020 Gaza patients\* in November to outside care.** According to the Ministry of Health Medical Referral Directorate in Ramallah, the main reasons for referral were in oncology, ophthalmology, MRI, heart catheterization, nuclear medicine, orthopaedic surgery, paediatrics, hematology, neurosurgery, and urology. Drug shortages drive many referrals; 33.3% of essential medicines and 40.6% of medical disposables were at zero stock at end November in Gaza Ministry warehouses.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for October:** NIS 9,574,204.

## REFERRALS

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

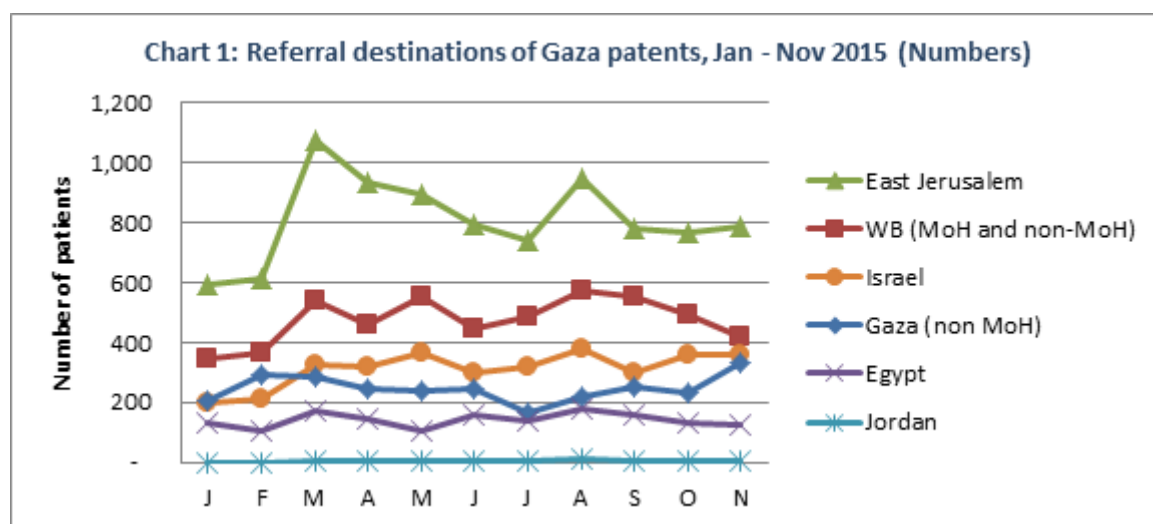
The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 2,020 referrals for Gaza patients in November, according to the Medical Referral Directorate data in Ramallah (**Table 1**), slightly higher than the monthly average in 2015. Referrals to non-MoH facilities in Gaza were 40% higher and to Israeli hospitals 15% higher, than the monthly average for the year while referrals to West Bank and Egypt and East Jerusalem were lower (13%, 14% and 3% respectively) (**Table 1** and **Chart 1**).

The 335 referrals to non-MoH facilities within the Gaza Strip were mainly for MRI, heart catheterization, rehabilitation, urology, pediatrics and cardiology.

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

Referral Destination	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	TOTAL
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	208	292	288	246	236	248	168	221	253	230	335	<b>2,725</b>
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	348	368	537	462	554	445	487	571	555	493	417	<b>5,237</b>
East Jerusalem	595	616	1,075	934	893	793	737	945	778	766	786	<b>8,918</b>
Jordan	0	1	4	4	2	5	3	9	4	2	2	<b>36</b>
Israel	198	214	329	320	366	301	321	382	299	359	356	<b>3,445</b>
Egypt	132	106	174	148	104	159	141	182	161	129	124	<b>1,560</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>21,921</b>

Source: MOH Medical Referral Directorate, Ramallah, December 17, 2015 [See Note, p.2]



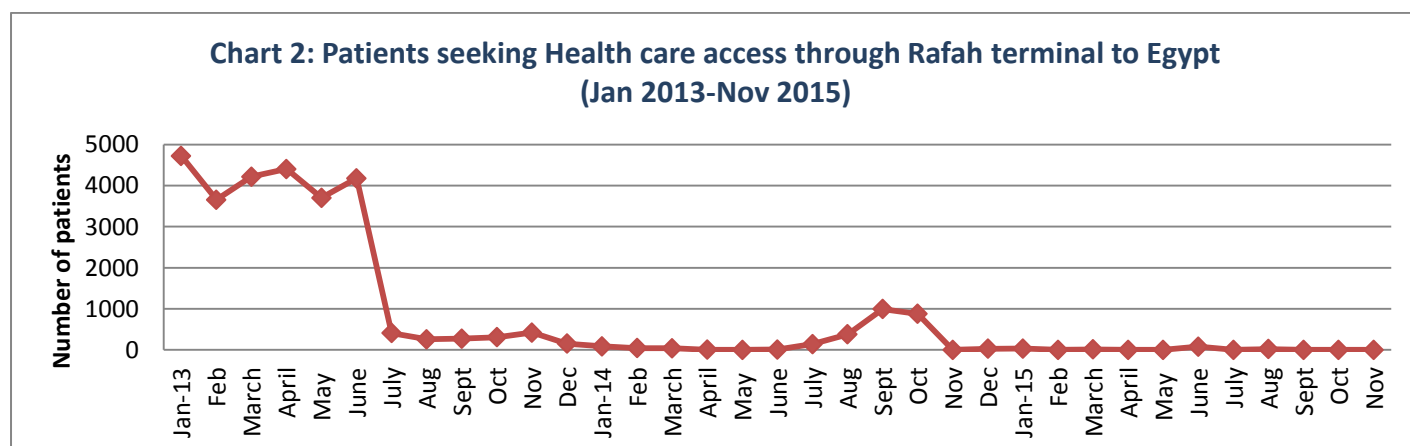
Of the 2,020 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in November, 1,561 ( 77.28%) depended on access approvals from Israel to exit from Erez checkpoint and 124 (6.14%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and required the Rafah border to be accessible).

The RAD in Ramallah reported an estimated cost of **NIS 9,574,204** for the 2,020 referrals for Gaza patients in November.

<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.

## Access through Rafah terminal

**No access to Egypt during November:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, Rafah border terminal was closed to travellers, including patients, during November, with the exception of the transfer to Gaza of the body of a resident who died in Egypt. The closure also prevented any medical delegations or medical aid from entering. Only 148 patients were able to cross into Egypt for health care this year, on the 24 days it was opened for humanitarian cases. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah monthly for health-related reasons. The terminal was last open for exit briefly in August allowing 21 patients and 23 companions to enter Egypt.



Rafah terminal has been closed by the Egyptian authorities since July 2013 except for the exit of a very limited number of humanitarian cases on very few days (**Chart 2**). Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah monthly for health-related access. The border has been opened a total of only 24 days so far this year, allowing only 148 of 1,560 Gaza patients referred by the MoH to cross into Egypt for health care.

## Access through Erez

In October and November 2015, the number of patients applying for permits to cross Erez for health care has been at the highest ever levels, while the rate of approvals has been the lowest recorded since 2009.

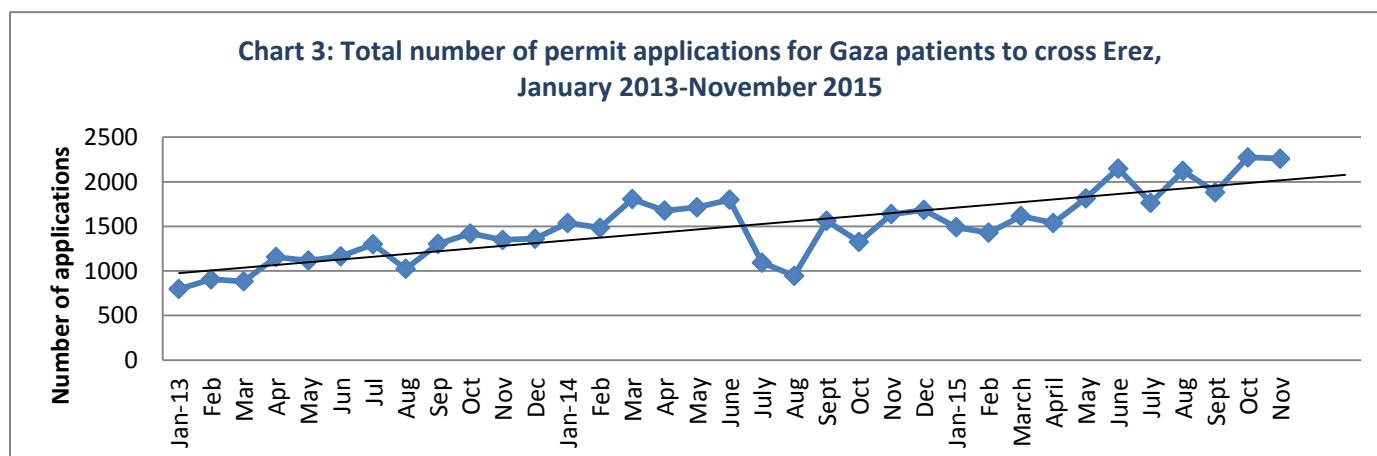
In November, a total of 2,260 applications were submitted to Israeli authorities for Israeli permits for patients to cross Erez, the second highest monthly total (October was slightly higher) since the blockade on Gaza was imposed in 2007. In the past 3 years (**Chart 3**) there has been a trend toward higher demand on access to health care through Erez in part due to blocked access to Egypt, especially for private patients. Of the total permit applications, 1,140 (50.44%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, 641 (28.36%) to the West Bank, 464 (20.53%) to Israel, and 15 (0.66%) to Jordan.

The process of applying for a permit is time-consuming and complicated, and sometimes requires multiple attempts. 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 which delays health care. Patients also sometimes reapply after they are denied a permit or if no response is received and the treatment is urgent. November data showed that out of the 2,260 applications submitted in the Palestinian coordination office, 12.8% (289 applications) were repeat attempts.

In November, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported that 1,616 (71.5%) applications for permits for patients were approved (**Table 2**), slightly higher than the previous month but the second lowest approval rate since October 2009. Approval rate in October 2009 was similar to this month. 155 applicants (6.86%) were denied access. 489 (21.64%) 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 July 2014.

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.

Permit applications should be submitted to the Israeli district liaison office 7-10 days prior to the hospital appointment date but in November, out of the total 2,260 applications from patients who has hospital appointments scheduled during the month, 717 (31.73%) were submitted less than a week before the referral hospital appointment date, 933 (41.28%) applications were submitted 8-14 days before the appointment, 560 (24.78%) were 15-30 days before, 48 (2.12%) were more than 30 days before and 2 (0.09%) applications were lost.



**Table 2: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS interviews, November 2015**

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	92	119	73	92	0	3	19	24	0	0
4 - 17	193	245	144	188	3	2	46	55	0	0
18 - 40	294	365	182	171	31	56	81	138	2	8
41 - 60	282	312	237	222	18	26	27	64	2	9
Over 60	183	175	164	143	6	10	13	22	0	2
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>1044</b>	<b>1216</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>816</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,260</b>		<b>1,616 (71.5%)</b>		<b>155 (6.86%)</b>		<b>489 (21.64%)</b>		<b>23 (1.02%)</b>	

\* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH –Gaza

Total patient permit applications in November 2015 were 38% higher than the corresponding month in 2014 while the approval rate was 7.47% lower and denial rate was 4.17% higher than in November 2014. Comparing the January to November period of 2015 to that of 2014, the number of applications was 22.6% higher, approval rate was 4.27% lower and denial rate was more than double in 2015 than in 2014 (Table 3).

**Table 3: Israeli District Liaison Office decisions on permit requests to cross Erez, by response, and sex of applicant (2015 compared to 2014)**

Period	November 2014		November 2015		January-November 2014		January–November 2015	
	Total	Rate	Total	Rate	Total	Rate	Total	Rate
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,636</b> (F:724; M:912)		<b>2,260</b> (F:1,044; M:1,216)		<b>16,582</b> (F:7,541; M:9,041)		<b>20,337</b> (F:9,469; M:10,868)	
Approved	1,292 (F:594; M:698)	78.97%	1,616 (F:800; M:816)	71.5%	13,542 (F:6,473; M:7,069)	81.67%	15,759 (F:7,783; M:7,976)	77.49%
Denied	44 (F:19; M:25)	2.69%	155 (F:58; M:97)	6.86%	472 (F:156; M:316)	2.85%	1,190 (F:381; M:809)	5.85%
Delayed	300 (F:111; M:189)	18.34%	489 (F:186; M:303)	21.64%	2,568 (F:912; M:1,656)	15.48%	3,388 (F:1,305; M:2,083)	16.66%
-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	<b>17</b> (F:1; M:16)	1.04%	<b>23</b> (F:4; M:19)	1.02%	<b>159</b> (F:20; M:139)	0.96%	<b>169</b> (F:38; M:131)	0.83%

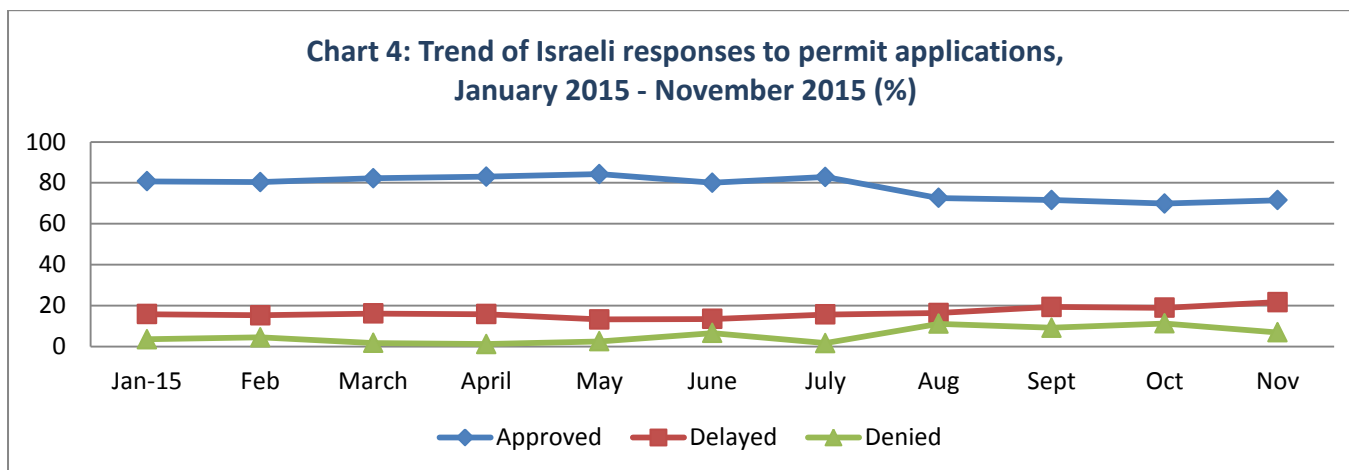
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Patient companions:** In November, 2,354 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. Only 64.61% were approved, 6.71% were denied and 28.68% were pending. Only one first-degree relative is permitted and permits are conditional on security interviews for

those aged 55 or younger. Hindering access for parents to accompany their sick children in effect delays medical care to children.

**Financial coverage:** 93.45% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in November were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.52% were self-funded, 1.28% by Peres Center for Peace, 1.19% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1.11% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.40% by the Military Medical Services, and 0.04% by Hadassa fund.

**Charts 4** shows a decline after July 2015 in Israeli approvals for patients' permit applications and an increase in delays. Denials in November are twice the average of first half of the year.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Denied care:** 155 patients (58 males; 97 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 8 children and 16 patients over 60 years old. Of the denied patients, 133 patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals and 22 in Israel. 147 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 3 were self-funded, 2 by other government services or Israeli NGOs. Of those denied: 12.9% (20 patients) had submitted their applications less than 8 days before the hospital appointment; 50.97% (79) had waited for a response for 8-14 days; 35.48% (55) waited 15-30 days; and 1 patient waited more than 30 days. The denied patients had appointments for neurosurgery (38), orthopedics (33), general surgery (15), gynecology/obstetrics (12), ophthalmology (10), urology (8), ENT (7) and the rest (32) were for 12 other specialties.

**Delayed care:** 489 patient applicants were delayed in reaching health care in November, the highest delayed number of applications since May 2008. 489 applications (303 males; 186 females), including 144 children and 35 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 489 patients delayed, 78.94% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 19.84% in Israel, and 1.22% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in oncology (86), orthopedics (63), ophthalmology (61), pediatrics (46), cardiology (36), neurosurgery (31), general surgery (17), hematology (17), internal medicine (17), nuclear medicine (16), nephrology (14), neurology (12), urology (12), vascular surgery (10), and the rest (51) were for 13 other specialties.

Out of 489 delayed patient applicants, 35.58% had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date. However, 39.26% waited 8-14 days, 21.68% waited 15-30 days and 3.07% waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request. 34 patients out of the delayed were eventually approved late, within the first 2 weeks of December.

**Security Interviews:** 23 patients (19 males; 4 females), 21 aged 18-60 and 2 males above 60 were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS).

**Patients and companions crossed Erez:** The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,533 Gaza patients (and 1,437 companions) crossed Erez in November to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals; of them 67 patients were transferred by ambulance (using back-to-back procedures) with 67 companions. Erez crossing was open for 26 days during regular day-time working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays) in November.

### **Patient arrested at Erez Crossing enroute to hospital**

Ahmed Rabee' Abed Rabbo, a 31-year-old patient from Jabalia, married and the father of four children, was arrested by Israeli security at Erez crossing on Sunday, November 15 while on his way to Surgicare hospital in Betunia, near Ramallah, West Bank, according to Al Mezan Center for human rights in Gaza. Ahmed was scheduled for a corneal transplant for his right eye and had a permit for his travel. His sister, who was accompanying him, told Al Mezan that the Israeli security summoned her brother for an interview when he entered the terminal. An hour later, an Israeli soldier informed her that her brother had been arrested and she must return to Gaza. As of this date, Ahmed is reported to be still in detention.

### **Access denied for patients from Gaza border area with injuries**

The Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza reported that patients who were injured near the border fence in recent months are being denied access through Erez to seek health care in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals. The following illustrate three cases are patients recently denied access for traumatic injuries in October and November 2015:

- A young 22-year-old man with injuries to both legs lost a large amount of bone and tissue and requires a complicated bone graft which is available only from an outside hospital. He applied twice for a permit for treatment outside of Gaza but was rejected by the Israeli authorities. He applied for the third time hoping to receive a permit.
- A 39-year-old father of six children was injured in his spine and suffers paralysis of his lower limbs. Three days after his injury, he was referred to the West Bank for vertebral fixation and returned to Gaza following treatment. Currently, he suffers from a serious infection in the operation site. Doctors at Shifa hospital have referred him to the West Bank for further treatment to control the infection but his applications for a permit have been rejected twice. The patient's family requested to change his destination to Egypt, and are now waiting for Rafah terminal to open. The family has also appealed to the ICRC and human rights organizations for assistance, without success so far.
- A 21-year-old man suffered injuries to his left knee which caused severe vascular, nerve and bone damage. He was referred by physicians for outside care in order to save his leg from amputation. He has twice applied for a permit and has been rejected both times.