



*The Referral Abroad Department in Gaza moved to larger office space in October 2014. © WHO*

## Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD10 (Nov. 24, 2014)

### Summary: October 2014

#### Detentions at Erez

A patient remains in Israeli detention after being taken from Erez checkpoint enroute to his hospital treatment. A patient's companion was detained and interrogated for 11 days before being turned to Gaza; his father returned to Gaza without accessing medical treatment (page 7).

#### Access restrictions increase

- **Rafah border:** Gaza's main access to Egypt through Rafah border has been completely closed since October 25 following an attack in north Sinai which killed 30 Egyptian soldiers. The terminal has been closed for 186 days (61% of days) since the beginning of the year.
- **Casualty patients:** 9 patients with war-related injuries applied to exit Gaza via Erez checkpoint. Five were approved, 2 were denied permits and 2 were delayed.
- **Erez permit applications and approvals drop:** 1,327 patients applied for Israeli permits to exit Gaza via Erez for medical treatment in October; only 78.22% of applicants were approved. 76 patients (27 females and 49 males, including 17 children and 4 elderly) were denied permits. 213 patients (77 females and 136 males, including 57 children and 26 elderly people over 60) received no response to their applications, and missed their medical treatment appointments.
- **Interrogations:** 15 patients (including 1 female) were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit to cross Erez. Only one was approved.

#### Referrals decline

- **Casualty patients referred:** 9 casualty patients were referred by the Ministry of Health during October. According to the MoH Referral Abroad department, an estimated additional 200 casualty patients have been waiting for referrals for 6 to 11 weeks.
- **Regular referrals declined 36%:** the Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza referred 1,188 patients in October to hospitals outside of (MoH) facilities, one third less than the monthly average for 2014.
- **Gender gap:** the gender gap in referrals widened: 59.6% male patients versus 40.4% female patients. 27.25% of all referrals were for children aged 0-17 years and 17.93% were for patients aged over 60 years.
- **Patients protest delays:** patients and families held a demonstration in front of the Gaza RAD offices to protest delays.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for October NIS 6,144,932**

## REFERRALS

### Referrals of Gaza patients drop

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,188 referrals for patients in Gaza in October, 20% less than the previous month and 36% less than the monthly average of 1,849 for the first half of 2014. In October, the number of referrals dropped to every destination, with the exception of referrals to Israel, compared to the previous month. Referrals were still below the pre-war levels of June 2014 for every destination except Egypt, which showed a slight rise in October over June levels (**Table 1, Chart 1**).

The referral system has been struggling to cope with demand after serious disruption caused by the conflict in July and August. Referrals since July averaged only 1,024 per month, equal to a loss of 3,300 patients without referrals over the four-month period.

The lack of capacity in specialized treatments of the Ministry of Health and private sector within Gaza remains the main driver for referrals. However, limiting factors are the high cost of referral care for the financially-strapped Palestinian Authority, the high number of recent casualty patients, the closure of Rafah border, the unpredictable security restrictions at Erez checkpoint and administrative complications of referrals to Europe and Jordan. The travel of 42 patients to Venezuela through Egypt scheduled for early November was suspended due to the total closure of Rafah terminal.

In October referrals to non-MoH facilities in Gaza were mainly for heart catheterization (52), MRI (49), rehabilitation (10), and pediatrics (8); the remaining 27 referrals were in 14 different specialties.



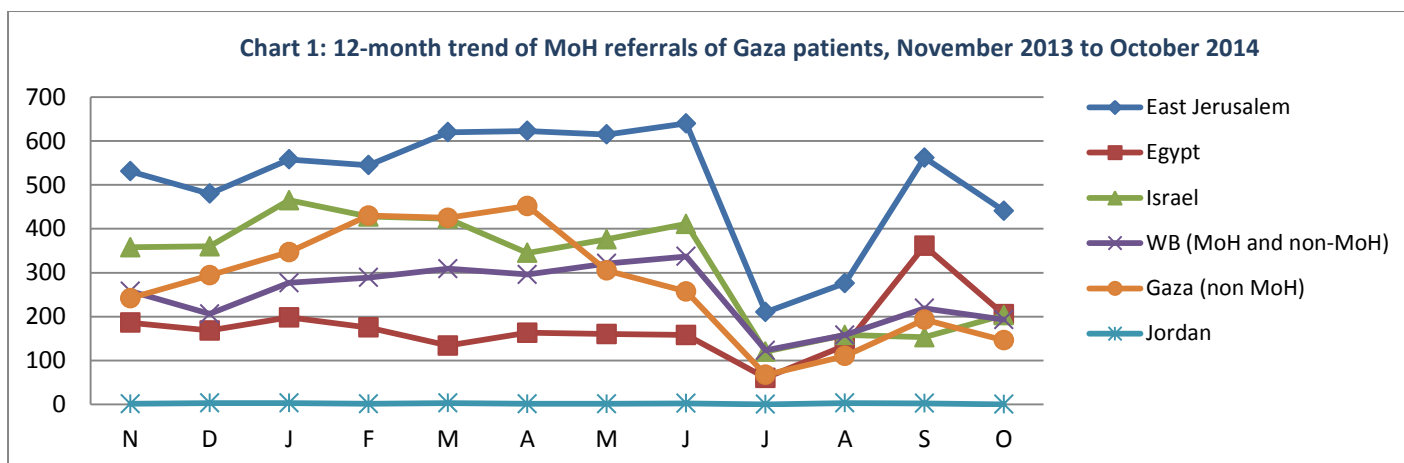
Patients and families organized a demonstration in front of the RAD in October 23 protesting delays of their referrals. Patients treated initially in Israeli hospitals also protested that the RAD now refers them for follow up to other destinations. October data showed that the majority of referral applications are processed within 2 weeks but 26% required between 3 weeks to 6 months.

Photo: Maannews.net

**Table 1: Palestinian MoH Referrals, by destination, January – October 2014**

Referral Destination	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Total	Monthly average Jan-June 014
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	347	430	425	452	305	257	67	110	193	146	2,732	369
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	277	289	309	296	321	337	123	158	219	193	2,522	305
East Jerusalem	558	545	620	623	615	640	210	276	562	441	5,090	600
Jordan	3	1	3	1	1	2	0	3	2	0	16	2
Israel	465	428	423	345	376	411	120	158	153	203	3,082	408
Egypt	198	175	134	163	160	158	60	134	361	205	1,748	165
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,848</b>	<b>1,868</b>	<b>1,914</b>	<b>1,880</b>	<b>1,778</b>	<b>1,805</b>	<b>580</b>	<b>839</b>	<b>1,490</b>	<b>1,188</b>	<b>15,190</b>	<b>1,849</b>

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza



Of the 1,188 patients referred in October, 1,042 (87.7%) were to health facilities outside Gaza: 837 patients (70.5%) required permits from Israeli authorities to exit through Erez crossing and 205 required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah.

27.52% of patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 17.93% were elderly patients over 60. Female referral patients were 40.4% of the total. (The data of the central RAD office in Ramallah showed that 1,406 patients with Gaza IDs were given financial coverage for referrals in October, an additional 218 referrals not registered in the Gaza data. The estimated cost for the 1,406 referrals according the main RAD in Ramallah was NIS 6,144,932.)

**Medical reasons for referrals:** The top ten specialties requiring referrals for treatment were: oncology—182 referrals (15.32%), orthopaedic surgery —98 (8.25%), nuclear medicine—97 (8.16%), ophthalmology—96 (8.08%), heart catheterization—95 (8%), paediatrics—86 (7.24%), neurosurgery—74 (6.23%), MRI —56 (4.71%), cardiology —44 (3.7%), haematology—42 (3.54%) and the remaining 318 (26.8%) referrals were to 19 other specialities.

**Referrals of casualty patients:** the Ministry referred 9 casualty patients with complicated injuries to hospitals outside of Gaza. RAD officials in Gaza estimate that almost 200 casualty patients are still on waiting lists for care in Italy, Venezuela, Spain, Germany, Jordan and France, pending completion of required medical and travel documentation, after which they must apply for Israeli permits to cross Erez. The Palestinian MoH and MoFA are coordinating their travel. Patients and their families report being under stress about the uncertainty of access for further medical treatments outside the Gaza Strip.

**Table 2: Referral destinations of casualty patients in October 2014**

Destination	Number
Jordan Hospital	5
Makassed Hospital	3
French Hospital-Nazareth	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office and RAD, MoH -Gaza.

## ACCESS

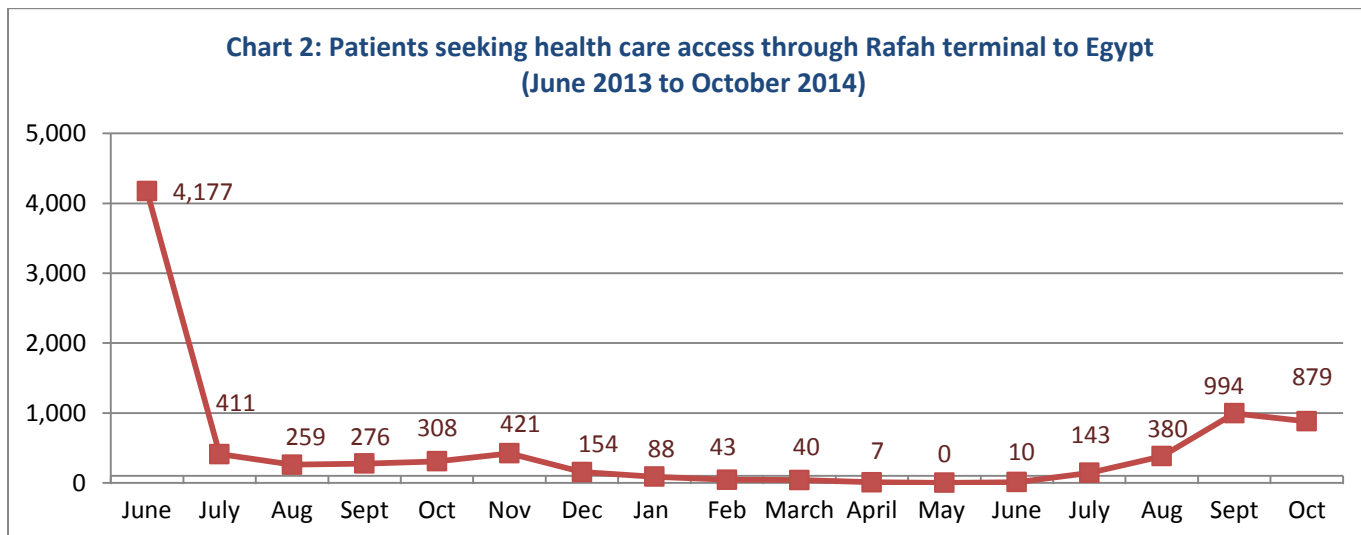
**Patient access to Egypt remains restricted:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the terminal was opened by the Egyptian authorities for humanitarian cases on 19 days in October, from 10:00 to 16:00. It was closed for 12 days (Oct. 3-7 for Eid Al-Adha and Egypt's victory day and 6 days for security reasons). The terminal has been completely closed since Oct. 25 following the attack in north Sinai which killed 30 Egyptian soldiers. Until the end of October, the terminal was closed for 186 days in 2014 (61% of days).

**Table 3: Rafah crossing during October 2014**

Item	Number of travellers
Total registered and attempted to cross towards Egypt	6,800
Seeking medical treatment	879 (13.93%) travelling for medical reasons
<i>Transferred by ambulances</i>	<i>37 patients transferred by ambulance with 48 companions</i>
Denied access and returned by Egypt	898 (13.2%)
<b>Total crossed</b>	<b>5,902 (86.8%)</b>

Source: Rafah Terminal

During the 19 open days in October, 6,800 persons attempted to cross from Gaza to Egypt, including 879 for medical reasons. Egyptian authorities refused access for 898 (13.2%) travellers and returned them to Gaza. The remaining 5,902 (86.8%) were primarily people holding Egyptian or foreign passports or legal residency abroad (**Table 3**). Access to Egypt has been restricted since July 2013. Access improved for casualties and others during and immediately after the July-August military attack on Gaza but in October it declined due to the security closure late in the month (**Chart 2**). The ambulance station at the terminal reported the transfer of 37 patients and 48 companions by ambulances. According to ambulance station personnel at the terminal, since the beginning of September the Egyptian medical officer on the Egyptian side stopped coordinating ambulances to transfer patients from Rafah to Cairo. Patient companions now need to coordinate their own ambulance transport which delays travel and increases expenses.



### Limited access for medical delegates and medical aid via Rafah

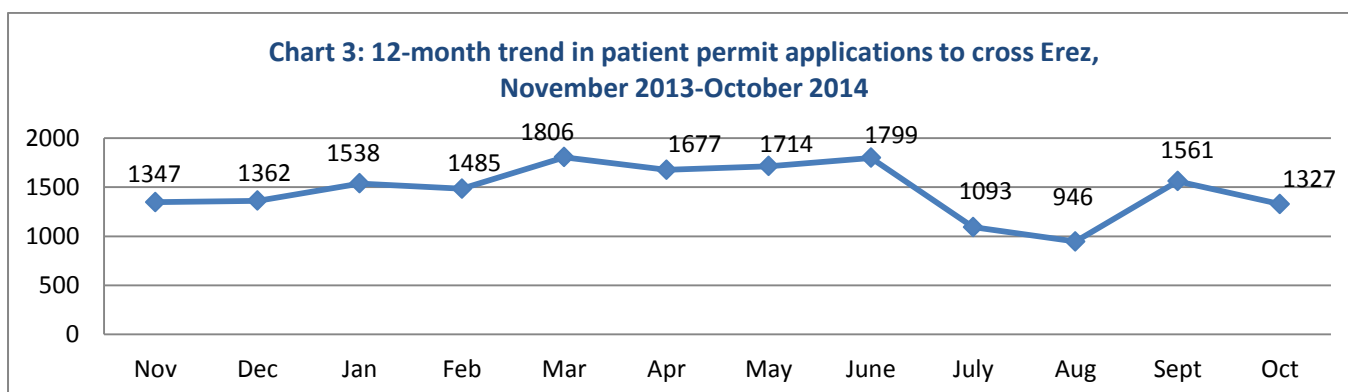
The Palestinian authorities at Rafah terminal reported that two medical delegations (totalling 23 health professionals from Algeria) were allowed to cross into Gaza from Egypt during October. The terminal authorities also reported that one donated ambulance entered Gaza. No medical supply shipments entered in October.

### Jordanian medical aid through Erez

In October 23, a Jordanian convoy entered through Erez crossing into Gaza carrying drugs and medical disposables for the continued operation of the Jordanian field hospital in Gaza. The convoy also carried humanitarian aid donated by Jordan and delivered to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society in Gaza. According to the commander of the Jordanian military field hospital in Gaza, a number of casualties who had completed their treatment in Jordan returned with the convoy.

### Patient applications to cross Erez drop

In October, the total number of permit applications to cross Erez (which includes casualty patients as well as normal referral patients) was 1,327 (79.5% of the pre-conflict monthly average of 1,670 applications) (**Chart 3**).



**Table 4: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS risk, October 2014**

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called for GSS interrogation	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	60	89	50	71	3	5	7	13	0	0
4 - 17	101	121	82	94	4	5	15	22	0	0
18 - 40	174	190	120	98	17	29	37	63	1	10
41 - 60	181	179	174	147	1	8	6	24	0	3
Over 60	115	117	101	101	2	2	12	14	0	1
Sub-total	631	696	527	511	27	49	77	136	1	14
Total	1,327		1,038 (78.22%)		76 (5.73%)		213 (16.05%)		15 (1.13%)	

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

In October, 1038 (78.22%) of patients' permit applications were approved, a drop from the average approval rate for the first half of 2014 of 84% (Table 4). 76 applicants (5.73%) were denied access, the highest number denied in one month since August 2010 when 87 patients were denied. 213 (16.05%) did not receive an answer in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

15 applicants were requested to attend a security interrogation as a prerequisite to process their applications. Only one substantially approved. Chart 4 shows the percentage trend in approvals, denials and delays over a 12-month period.

**Slow access for casualty patients:** Of the 9 casualty patients with complicated injuries who were referred to hospitals outside of Gaza, only 5 were approved permits to cross Erez in October, 2 were denied and 2 were delayed. RAD officials in Gaza estimate that almost 200 casualty patients are still on waiting lists for care in Italy, Venezuela, Spain, Germany, Jordan and France, pending completion of required medical and travel documentation. The Palestinian MoH and MoFA are coordinating their travel. Patients and their families report being under stress about the uncertainty of access for further medical treatments outside the Gaza Strip.

**Financial coverage:** 93.22% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in October were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 3.69% were self-funded, 1.36% by the Peres Center for Peace, 0.68% funded by receiving hospitals (9 casualties), 0.53% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.3% by Nour Al-Alam foundation, and 0.23% by other organizations. Patients and companions often face financial problems during long stays in hospitals due to uncovered costs such as transportation, companion costs and some patient care items such as medicines not available in the hospital supply.

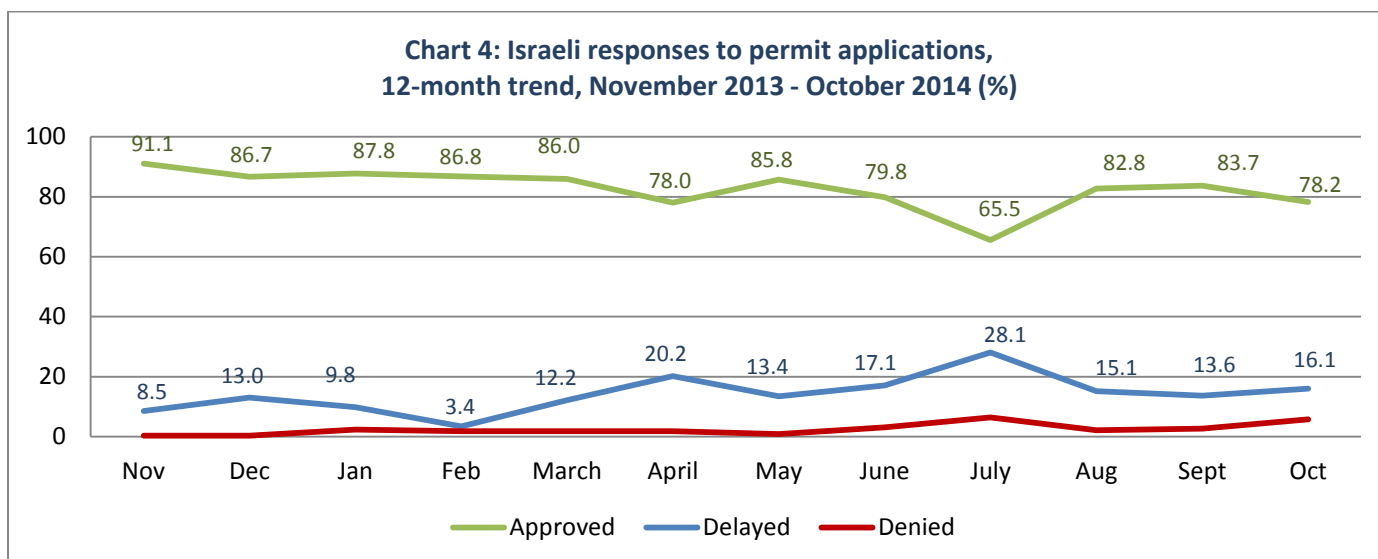
**Table 5: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by response, sex of applicant and comparison with corresponding periods in 2013 and 2014 (number and %)**

Period	October 2013		October 2014		January – October 2013		January – October 2014	
Total	1,420 (F:655; M:765)		1,327 (F:631; M:696)		11,067 (F:5,155; M:5,912)		14,946 (F:6,817; M:8,129)	
Approved	1,314 (F:620; M:694)	92.54%	1,038 (F:527; M:511)	78.22%	9,712 (F:4,655; M:5,057)	87.76%	12,250 (F:5,879; M:6,371)	81.96%
Denied	11 (F:1; M:10)	0.77%	76 (F:27; M:49)	5.73%	31 (F:3; M:28)	0.28%	428 (F:137; M:291)	2.86%
Delayed	95 (F:34; M:61)	6.69%	213 (F:77; M:136)	16.05%	1,324 (F:496; M:828)	11.96%	2,268 (F:801; M:1467)	15.18%
-- called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	22 (F:4; M:18)	1.55%	15 (F:1; M:14)	1.13%	150 (F:29; M:121)	1.36%	142 (F:19; M:123)	0.95%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Denied care:** 76 patients (27 females; 49 males) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 17 children and 4 persons over 60 years. 2 were conflict-related casualties. 58 of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 13 in Israel and 5 in Jordan. Of the denied patients, 71 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 3 self-funded, and 2 were war-related casualty patients covered by the receiving hospitals. 54 patients waited 1-7 days, 16 waited 8-14 days, 4 waited 15-30 and 2 patients waited more than 30 days before their applications were denied. 16 patients out of the 76 people denied had

appointments for ophthalmology, 13 orthopedics, 7 pediatric, 7 neurology, 6 oncology, 4 cardiology, 4 internal medicine, and 4 nuclear medicine. The remaining 15 applications were for 10 other specialties.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Delayed care:** According to the Palestinian District Coordination office, 213 patient applicants (136 males; 77 females), including 57 children and 26 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 213 patients delayed, 77% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 17.87% in Israel, and 5.16% in Jordan. The Ministry of Health financially covered 89.67% of these referrals, 6.1% were self-funded, 1.41% by Peres center for peace, 0.94% by for casualties covered by the receiving hospitals, 0.94% by Physicians for human rights-Israel, 0.45% by the medical military service, and 0.45% by Noor Al-Alam foundation.

Patients should apply 10 days prior to their appointments and Israeli authorities should give a response to applicants within that time. Of the patients delayed, 35.21% of applications (75 of 213) were submitted within 1 week prior to the scheduled appointment. 79 (37.09%) patients were still awaiting a response up to 2 weeks, 57 (26.76%) up to one month and 2 after one month. Out of the 213 applications, 22 were eventually approved but after the appointment date had passed.

**Security Interviews:** 15 patients (14 males; 1 female) were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) as a condition to process their application. Only one subsequently received a permit.

**Crossing Erez:** The office of the Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 950 patients crossed Erez in October to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals, in addition to 977 companions. Of the 950 patients, 77 were transferred by ambulances (back-to-back). Erez crossing was open for 27 days with regular day-time working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays) during the month.

### Medical delegates though Erez

The WHO applied for a total of 48 foreign health professionals to enter Gaza to support the Palestinian health system in the aftermath of the recent conflict. The WHO applies for permits to cross Erez into or out of Gaza through an online system for health professionals. Until November 17, 2014, 29 (60%) of the 48 who applied were approved entry, and 19 are still in process.

## Detentions at Erez

### Patient arrested by Israeli authorities at Erez

According to Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, on Monday October 27, Mohamed Ribhi Abu Khalifa was arrested by the Israeli authorities at Erez while he was en route to the Arab specialized hospital in Nablus. According to the patient's family, Mohamed was told by the Palestinian civil affairs office that his permit was approved and he could travel for treatment. Mohamed, accompanied by his aunt Khitam, traveled the next day to Erez, where Mohamed was arrested and his companion was returned. According to Al Mezan, until November 17 Mohammed was still in detention.

### Companion detained from Erez and held 11 days, then released

On October 28, Hassan Mohamed Muhana, 39, who was accompanying his father Mohammed Muhana, 69, to an appointment in Makassed hospital, was arrested by the Israeli authorities at Erez. The family had been informed the night before that the patient's permit had been approved with that of his companion. Mohammed waited from 9:30 am until 4 pm for his son to be released from interrogation. During this time, the patient became very tired and fainted. The Israelis decided to arrest Hassan and told his father to return to Gaza. According to a family member, Mohammed has an abscess in the chest cavity and was referred for surgery due to his high risk of complications from anesthesia. After the arrest of his son Mohammed returned to his doctor in Gaza and he had a drainage tube inserted under local anesthesia with very little improvement. He remains hospitalized in Shifa hospital. Hassan spent a total of 10 days in Ashkelon prison under interrogation. He was released on November 11 back to Gaza.

**Patients denied permits:** The following cases are of patients who were among the 76 denied access during October:

- Zain is a one-year-old child suffering from renal failure who has been treated in Rambam hospital in Israel, crossing Erez on four previous occasions. Recently he began hemodialysis treatment and had an appointment in October with his mother as a companion. The mother was denied a permit and therefore the child could not access medical treatment.
- 5-year-old twins Tasneem and Lamees have a rare metabolic disease. They had an appointment in Shneider hospital in Israel on October 27 and the family submitted the permit applications 6 days before the appointment. Both parents were permitted to exit through Erez earlier this year but this time both were denied, resulting in the children not being able to access their medical treatment.
- Waseem, 18, suffers from a cardiac condition and is easily fatigued, and often short of breath, according to the family. He was referred for treatment at the Arab Care hospital in Ramallah but his permit was denied. His family appealed through a human right organization and he is waiting for a response.
- Jihad, 22, has leukemia and has been treated in Tel Hashomir hospital in Israel where he had bone marrow transplantation but unfortunately the transplant was rejected. He needs follow up treatment for which he applied for a permit in October but was denied access through Erez. He had been told that his application was received 'late'. He is trying again.
- Islam is a 24-year-old young woman with cancer thyroid. She had surgery in Gaza and now the RAD issued her a referral to Al-Ahli hospital in Hebron for further treatment not available in Gaza. She applied twice and was denied both times. After applying for a third time, this time through a human rights organization, her permit was approved. She crossed for treatment in November 14, 2014.
- Mazen, 27, is a war-casualty patient with a fracture in his arm and a nerve injury that limits his arm movement. The RAD in Gaza referred him to Jordan for fine surgery to treat his injury but he was denied a permit to cross Erez. In October he travelled through Cairo to Amman airport but the Jordanian authorities returned him back to Cairo from the airport because he did not have a permit to enter Jordan. "I applied again and I have been told that my application is pending," said Mazen.