



Rafah crossing was partially opened for humanitarian cases only for 4 days in December 2014 © WHO

Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD12 (Jan. 28, 2015)

Summary: December 2014

Access restrictions tighten

- **Rafah border:** Gaza's access to Egypt through Rafah border was closed for 27 days in December. 28 patients travelled to Egypt on the 3 open days. Access has been restricted since July 2013 bus was halted following the October 25 attack in north Sinai which killed 30 Egyptian soldiers. In 2014, the terminal was closed on 241 days (66% of days).
- **Access through Erez:** only 81.89% of 1,684 patients who applied for Israeli permits to exit Gaza via Erez for medical treatment in December were approved. 56 patients (20 females and 36 males, including 3 children and 1 elderly) were denied permits. 249 patients (89 females and 160 males, including 61 children and 22 elderly people over 60) received no response to their applications, and missed their medical treatment appointments.
- **Interrogations:** 20 patients (including 1 female) were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit to cross Erez. 1 patient was later approved.

Casualty patients

- Of the 8 patients (including 2 children) with war-related injuries who applied to exit Gaza via Erez checkpoint, 6 were approved to exit for travel to Jordan, and 2 were delayed. The patients had been referred by the Ministry of Health during December with the cost to be covered by the receiving hospitals.

Low referrals reflect new policy guidelines

- **Referrals declined 20.5%:** the Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza referred 1,489 patients in December to hospitals outside of (MoH) facilities, 20.5% less than the monthly average for the first half of 2014.
- **Gender gap:** the gender gap in referrals widened: 56.35% male patients versus 43.65% female patients. 24.91% of all referrals were for children aged 0-17 years and 18.54% were for patients aged over 60 years.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for December:** NIS 8,601,579.

In 2014: The average monthly referrals in the second half of 2014 (1,172) is 37% lower than in the first half in 2014 (1,849). The volume of permit applications in 2014 was 32.6% higher, while the approval rate was 6.29% lower than in 2013. A total of 528 patients were denied access in 2014 compared to only 40 patients denied in 2013, indicating more severe restrictions on health access.

REFERRALS

Referrals of Gaza patients

The data of Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza showed that the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,489 referrals in December. The average monthly referrals in the second half of 2014 (1,172) is 37% lower than in the first half in 2014 (1,849). This is due not only to the low number of referrals during the military attack on Gaza during July and August but also a result of new guidelines used by the ministry to avoid higher referral costs of treatment in Israeli hospitals. There were 4,059 fewer referrals in the second half of 2014, compared to the first half.

The number of referrals to medical facilities in Israel has dropped to less than half that of the first half of the year, while referrals to East Jerusalem hospitals decreased 24%. Referrals to Egypt are still low, reflecting the closure of Rafah for Gaza residents, including most patients. **(Table 1, Chart 1)**. The lack of capacity in specialized treatments of the Ministry of Health and the private sector within Gaza remains the main driver for referrals.

Referral expenditures account for one-third of the MoH budget and, due to budget shortfalls, result in increasing debts to referral hospitals. Jordanian hospitals have refused to accept MoH referral patients since 2013 as a result of outstanding debt from the Palestinian Authority. The cost of treatment for referral patients in Israeli hospitals, however, is covered by Israeli withholdings of import and VAT taxes that should be transferred to the Palestinian Authority monthly.

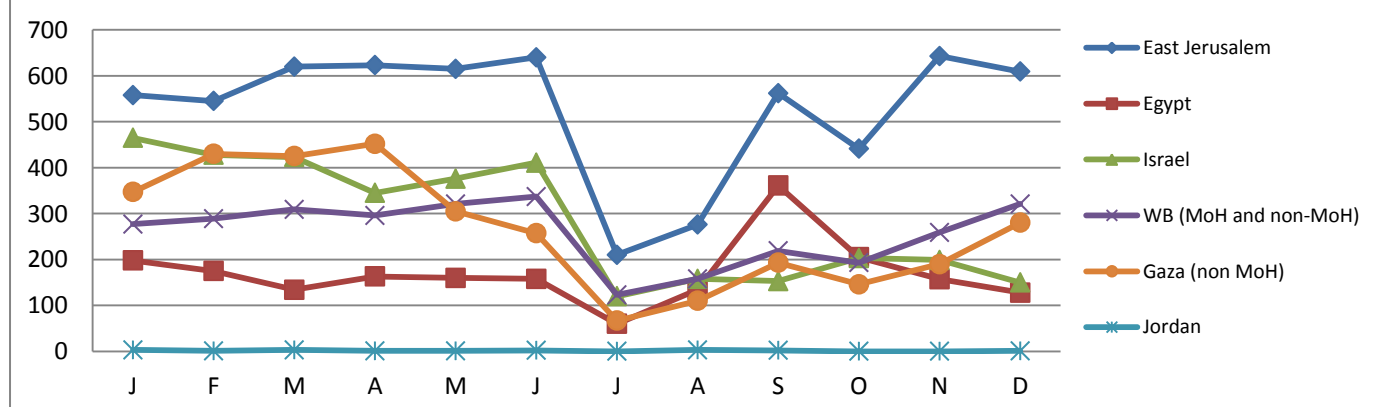
Table 1: Palestinian MoH Referrals, by destination, January – December 2014

Referral Destination	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	347	430	425	452	305	257	67	110	193	146	190	280	3,202
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	277	289	309	296	321	337	123	158	219	193	259	321	3,102
East Jerusalem	558	545	620	623	615	640	210	276	562	441	643	609	6,342
Jordan	3	1	3	1	1	2	0	3	2	0	0	1	17
Israel	465	428	423	345	376	411	120	158	153	203	199	150	3,431
Egypt	198	175	134	163	160	158	60	134	361	205	157	128	2,033
Total	1,848	1,868	1,914	1,880	1,778	1,805	580	839	1,490	1,188	1,448	1,489	18,127

Source: Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department, Gaza

Note: The data of the central RAD office in Ramallah for Gaza referrals includes an additional 353 referrals not registered in the Gaza data. It indicates that 1,842 patients with Gaza IDs were given financial coverage for referrals in December. The estimated cost for these referrals based on the main RAD in Ramallah was NIS 8,601,579.

Chart 1: Trend of last 12 months of referrals of Gaza patients, Jan. 2014 to Dec. 2014



Of the 1,489 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in December, 1,209 (81.2%) were to health facilities outside Gaza: 1,081 patients (72.6%) required permits from Israeli authorities to exit through Erez crossing and 128 (8.6%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah. 280 referrals to non-MoH facilities in Gaza were mainly for MRI (94), heart catheterization (84), urology (31), general surgery (14) rehabilitation (11) and the remaining (46) were for 14 other specialties.

24.91% of patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 18.54% were elderly patients over 60. Female referral patients were 43.65% of the total, compared to 56.35% male patients. 93.75% of referrals in December were for hospital admissions and 6.25% for outpatient clinics. 85.09% of referral applications were processed by the RAD within 30 days.

Medical reasons for referrals: The top ten specialties requiring referrals for treatment were: oncology—221 referrals (14.84%), orthopaedic surgery —122 (8.19%), heart catheterization—109 (7.32%), MRI —103 (6.92%), ophthalmology—103 (6.92%), nuclear medicine—90 (6.04%), paediatrics—89 (5.98%), urology—70 (4.7%), neurosurgery—69 (4.63%), haematology—67 (4.5%), and the remaining 446 (29.95%) referrals were to 21 other specialties.

Referrals of casualty patients: the Ministry referred 8 casualty patients (including 2 children) with complicated injuries to hospitals outside of Gaza. 4 were to Makassed hospital and 1 was to St. Joseph hospital in East Jerusalem, and 3 were to a Jordanian hospital. Of the 8 patients, 6 were approved permits to cross Erez in December, and 2 were delayed.

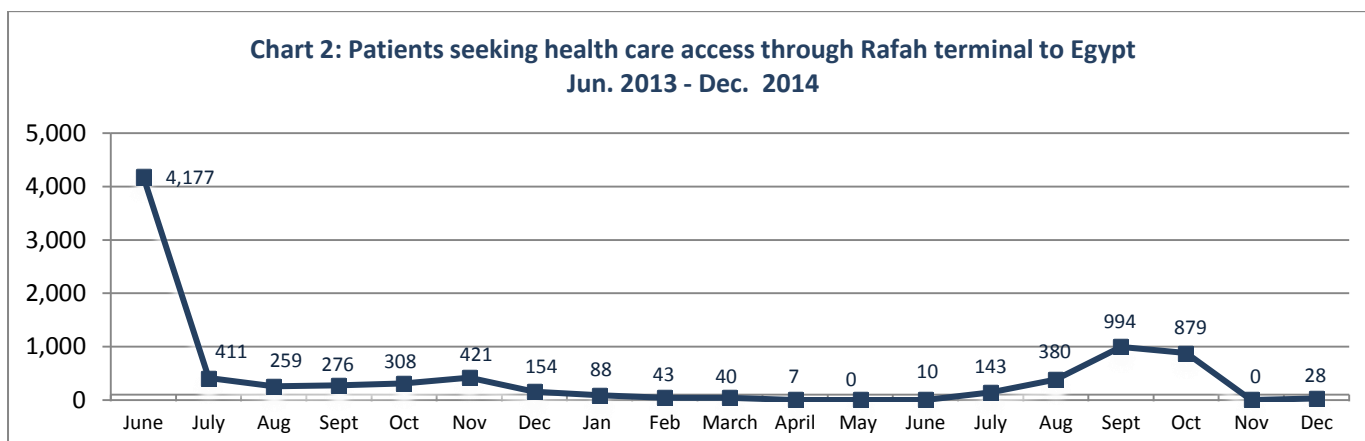
Access through Rafah terminal

Patient access to Egypt remains restricted: According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the terminal was opened by the Egyptian authorities in both directions on 3 days (Dec. 1, 21, 22, and 23) (**Table 2**) and one day only for entry into Gaza.

Table 2: Travellers exiting Rafah to Egypt	1522
Patients	28
Patient companions	32
Patients transferred by ambulance	16
Days closed	28
Days opened	3

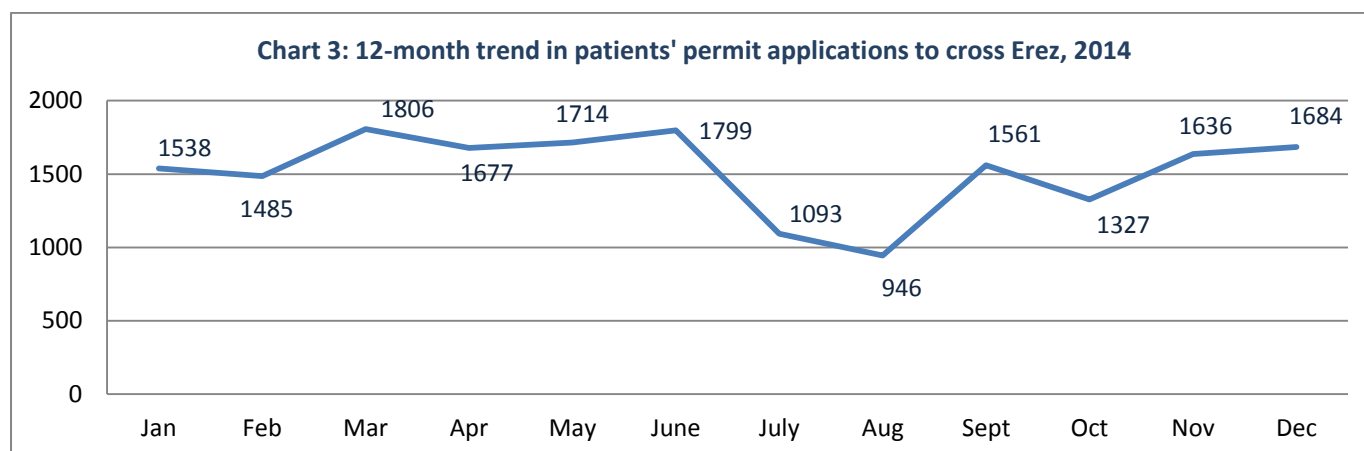
Also 1,400 travellers who were stranded in Egypt were allowed to return to Gaza. The Palestinian side of the terminal registered 6 returning patients among the 1,400 travellers returning to Gaza. According to Palestinian authorities at Rafah terminal, no medical delegations were allowed to cross into Gaza from Egypt during December and no medical supply shipments entered.

Health access to Egypt has been an important alternative for Gaza patients, especially those with advanced cancer, renal and heart diseases, and orthopedic and ophthalmological conditions, but has been restricted since July 2013. In 2014 the terminal was closed on 241 days (66% of days) and had been shut totally since the October 25 attack in north Sinai which killed 30 Egyptian soldiers. During and immediately after the July-August military attack on Gaza, however, access was facilitated for casualty patients and others. The MoH estimates that at least 1,000 patients are waiting to exit Gaza and an additional 1,000 patients are unable to return, delaying the continuation of their treatment inside Gaza (**OCHA Humanitarian Update**, 25 November 2014).



Access through Erez

In December, the total number of patients' applications for Israeli permits to cross Erez (casualty patients as well as normal referral patients) was 1,684, consistent with the pre-conflict monthly average of 1,670 applications (**Chart 3**). Out of the 1,684 permit applications, 807 (47.92%) were for patients destined to East Jerusalem, 442 (26.25%) to Israel, 385 (22.86%) to West Bank and 50 (2.97%) to Jordan.



In December, 1,379 (81.89%) of patients' permit applications were approved, 2% less than the average approval rate for the first half of 2014 of 84% (**Table 3**). 56 applicants (3.33%) were denied access. 249 (14.78%) did not receive an answer in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

Table 3: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS risk, December 2014

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called for GSS interrogation	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	64	89	58	74	1	0	5	15	0	0
4 - 17	117	173	95	152	1	1	21	20	0	0
18 - 40	228	277	165	174	17	30	46	73	1	14
41 - 60	247	226	236	185	1	4	10	37	0	5
Over 60	104	158	97	142	0	1	7	15	0	0
Missed	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sub-total	760	924	651	728	20	36	89	160	1	19
Total	1,684		1,379 (81.89%)		56 (3.33%)		249 (14.78%)		20 (1.19%)	

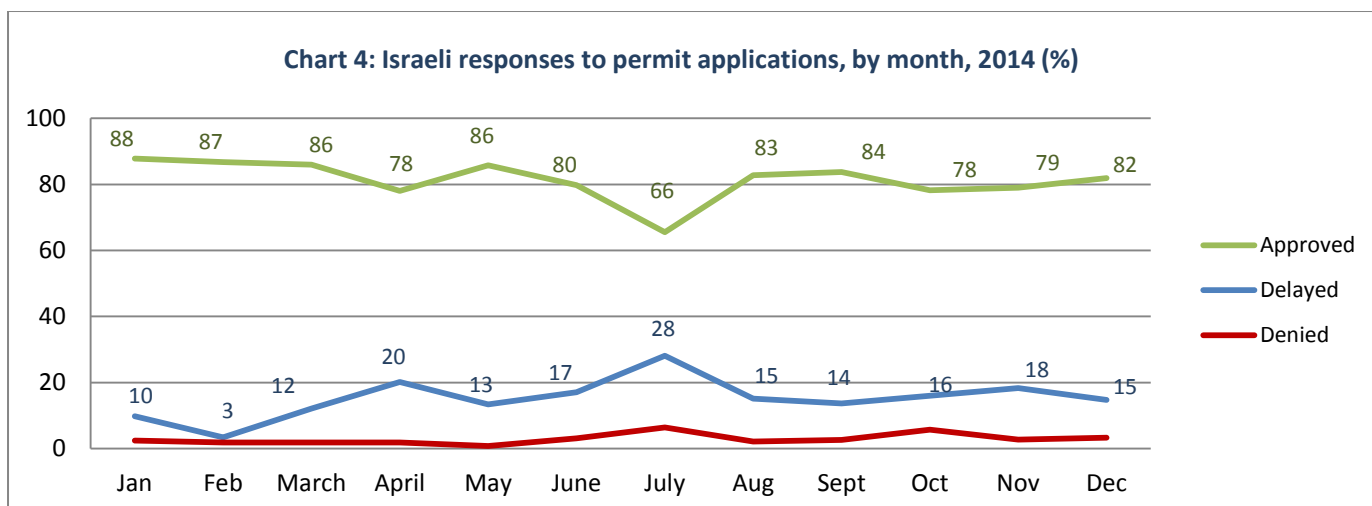
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

The volume of permit applications in 2014 was 32.6% higher, while the approval rate was 6.29% lower than in 2013. A total of 528 patients were denied access in 2014 compared to only 40 patients denied in 2013, indicating increased restrictions in health access (**Table 4**). The rate of approvals for permit applications ranged between 87.78% in January to 65.51% in July in 2014 (**Chart 4**).

Table 4: 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	December 2013		December 2014		January – December 2013		January – December 2014	
Total	1,362 (F:658; M:704)		1,684 (F:760; M:924)		13,776 (F:6,437; M:7,339)		18,266 (F:8,301; M:9,965)	
Approved	1,181 (F:587; M:594)	86.71%	1,379 (F:651; M:728)	81.89%	12,120 (F:5,830; M:6,290)	87.98%	14,921 (F:7,124; M:7,797)	81.69%
Denied	4 (F:1; M:3)	0.29%	56 (F:20; M:36)	3.33%	40 (F:4; M:36)	0.29%	528 (F:176; M:352)	2.89%
Delayed	177 (F:70; M:107)	13%	249 (F:89; M:160)	14.78%	1,616 (F:603; M:1013)	11.73%	2,817 (F:1,001; M:1,816)	15.42%
-- called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	14 (F:1; M:13)	1.03%	20 (F:1; M:19)	1.19%	199 (F:29; M:170)	1.29%	179 (F:21; M:158)	0.98%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.



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Financial coverage: 91.86% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in December were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 4.22% were self-funded, 1.54% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1.13% by the Peres Center for Peace, 0.48% funded by receiving hospitals (8 casualties), 0.36% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, and 0.36% by military medical services; 0.06% were funded by other organizations.

Denied care: 56 patients (20 females; 36 males) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 3 children and 1 person over 60 years. 43 of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 11 in Israel and 2 in Jordan. Of the denied patients, 51 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 3 self-funded, 1 by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel and 1 by the military medical services. 43 patients waited 1-7 days, 8 waited 8-14 days, and 5 waited 15-30 days before their applications were denied. The 56 patients had appointments for orthopedics (8), hematology (6), nuclear medicine (6), cardiology (5), neurology (5), neurosurgery (4), oncology (4), ophthalmology (4), general surgery (4), and the remaining 10 were for 8 other specialties.

Delayed care: According to the Palestinian District Coordination office, 249 patient applicants (160 males; 89 females), including 61 children and 22 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 249 patients delayed, 75.1% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 20.08% in Israel, and 4.82% in Jordan. The Ministry of Health financially covered 89.16% of these referrals, 4.82% were self-funded, 2.01% were funded by Noor Al-Alam Foundation, 1.61% by Peres Center for Peace, 0.80% by the medical military service, 0.80% casualties covered by the receiving hospitals, 0.40% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel and 0.40% by another organization.

Patients should apply 10 days before appointments and should be given a response within that time. Out of the 249 delayed applications, 82 (32.93%) remained waiting for one month or more. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in cardiology (38), orthopedics (35), oncology (24), ophthalmology (24), nuclear medicine (22), neurosurgery (19), pediatrics (19), neurology (10), hematology (10), and 48 in other specialties.

Security Interviews: 20 patients (19 males; 1 female) were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) as a condition to process their application. Only 1 was approved after the interview.

Patients and companions crossed Erez: The office of the Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,202 patients crossed Erez in December to access hospitals, in addition to 1,156 companions. Of the 1,202 patients, 101 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 through Erez

In December, the WHO submitted 14 applications for health professionals (5 foreign health professionals to enter Gaza to support the Palestinian health system and 9 Palestinian mental health professionals from Gaza to participate in training in the West Bank). The WHO applies for permits to cross Erez into or out of Gaza through an online system for health professionals. Until January 25, 3 out of 14 were approved and the remaining 11 were still in process. 6 had been waiting for approval for 54 days and 4 for 34 days.