

## Egyptian border restrictions create misery in Gaza

RAFAH, 17 September 2013 (IRIN) - Residents and officials in Gaza say the repeated closures of the border crossing into Egypt, a key lifeline for Palestinians in the occupied territories, is destroying livelihoods, harming health and lowering basic living conditions. The border crossing at Rafah has now been closed for seven consecutive days - the second sustained closure in the past few weeks - following instability in the Sinai region on the Egyptian side of the border.

A reopening is promised tomorrow, Wednesday, but the closures, reduced operating hours and the crackdown on smuggling tunnels are squeezing the country's most important supply line.

Among those who have tried to leave Gaza over the past few weeks is Mona Hussien, 34, and her four children, who normally live in Saudi Arabia.

"I've been to the crossing about five times now [in less than two weeks]. My children are tired and so am I. We have school coming. It's our residency at stake; we have to go," she told IRIN.

She came to spend the summer with relatives in Gaza, but has grown increasingly desperate to re-join her husband.

"When are we going to go back to normal? How we can live like other people while we are facing such restrictions, closures and [the] blockade?"

### "Stranded"

The Rafah crossing has been the principal connection between Gaza's 1.8 million residents and the outside world since the destruction of Gaza's international airport in 2001 and the subsequent air and naval blockade.

Last week's decision to close the border was taken by the Egyptian authorities following an attack by militants on a military base in northern Sinai.

"Thousands are trying to leave and enter every day," said Gaza resident Yehia Barrawi, 62. "Even with the announced temporary reopening, many will still be blocked, and we no longer feel the crossing is stable."

The situation has deteriorated since late June, when demonstrations erupted in Egypt, culminating in the removal of president Mohamed Morsi in early July. The Egyptian army initiated a campaign against armed militants and extremist groups operating in the Sinai, which media close to the new government have linked to the Hamas movement, which controls neighbouring Gaza.

Even when the crossing has been open, hours have been reduced from nine to four and from seven days to six.

In the week before these recent closures, from 3 to 9 September, UN figures show at least 150 people crossed into Egypt and around 130 others crossed into Gaza per day. Together, this is just [15 percent](#) of the average number of people crossing per day in June (approximately 1,860).

The other two crossings - into Israel - at [Kerem Shalom](#) and Erez have severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods.

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Yehia has been repeatedly prevented from crossing the border. He's recovering from heart surgery in Gaza and says he now risks losing his work and residency permits in the United Arab Emirates because of the delays. "I came to Gaza with my wife and daughter six months ago. Everything was fine. However it changed after the recent developments. Now, I'm stranded," he said.

### Restrictions and concerns

Gaza's health minister, Mofeed Mukhalalati, says there are thousands of patients waiting to leave for medical treatment in Egypt.

Several medical delegations planning to treat patients and train local health ministry staff were denied permission to enter Gaza.

Alaa, 26, who requires knee surgery after sustaining an injury in a football game three months ago, says he has tried several times to leave through the crossing, but despite having all the supporting documents, he was denied entry by Egyptian authorities.

Alaa told IRIN that he found it shocking because he had travelled to Egypt a few months before, and had entered the country and returned without any problems.

There are ongoing efforts to find a possible way to permanently reopen the crossing, according to officials in Gaza. Meanwhile, a handful of Palestinians are clustered at the crossing gate, urging an immediate reopening.

"The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is very concerned about recent security measures and restrictions on the Rafah crossing and tunnels between Egypt and the Gaza Strip," said the UN Secretary-General's spokesperson, Farhan Haq, [earlier this month](#).

"The restrictions have resulted in delays for students and patients seeking urgent medical treatment, and shortages of construction materials, fuel and medical supplies. Thousands of Palestinians are stranded on both sides of the border."

On 16 September, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas asked the Egyptians to reopen the crossing to allow people and patients to leave and to let people stranded in Egypt enter Gaza.

Egyptian officials responded hours later by announcing that the crossing will be temporarily opened on Wednesday and Thursday, 18 and 19 September, for humanitarian reasons. There are no indications or announcements about any later openings.

### Shortages and inflation

The closures, along with the large-scale destruction of [smuggling tunnels](#) that were a major supply route into Gaza, are leading to shortages and higher prices for basic goods.

OCHA estimates that fewer than 10 tunnels are operational, down from 50 in previous weeks and 300 before June.

Gaza depends on supplies of cheap Egyptian fuel to run its main power station. With daily fuel imports down to 200,000 litres, from one million, Gaza is suffering long hours of blackouts.