

*People waiting at Rafah crossing in December 2015. In 2015 only 178 patients were able to cross into Egypt for health care. ©WHO*



## Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 1 (March. 3, 2016)

### Summary: January 2016

#### Erez crossing

- **Rise in approval rate for patients' permits over previous month:** Of 2,011 patient applications submitted for permits to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in January, 78.22% were approved, an improvement over the 67.24% approval rate in December 2015. Forty-seven patients (2.34%), including a child and an elderly person over 60 years, were denied and 391 patients (19.44%), including 102 children and 44 elderly people over 60, received no response to their applications (Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza).
- **Alarming increase in number of patients requested for security interview (GSS):** 114 patients, among them 35 females, were requested for GSS interviews during January. This is 50% of the total number of patients requested during the entire year of 2015.

#### Rafah exit

- **No access to Egypt during January:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, Rafah border terminal was completely closed in both directions during January for all travellers, including patients or other humanitarian travellers. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza through Egypt during the month.

#### Ministry of Health Referrals in January

- Ministry of Health referred **2,057 patients** in January to outside care with an estimated cost of **NIS 10,369,507**. Top 5 needed procedures for Gaza patients were in Oncology, haematology, MRI, heart catheterization, and paediatrics.

## REFERRALS

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

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 2,057 referrals<sup>1</sup> for Gaza patients in January, according to the Medical Referral Directorate data in Ramallah (**Table 1**), close to the monthly average in 2015. Most referrals were to the East Jerusalem hospitals (42%), and distributed more evenly to West Bank hospitals (21%), Israeli hospitals (17%) and within Gaza (16%), while referrals to Egypt (4%) were low due to the lack of access. Compared to the monthly average in 2015, referrals were higher to non-MoH facilities in Gaza (28.7%), to Israeli hospitals (14%) and to East Jerusalem hospitals (7%), and lower to Egypt (43%) and to West Bank hospitals (10%) than the monthly average (**Table 1 and Chart 1**).

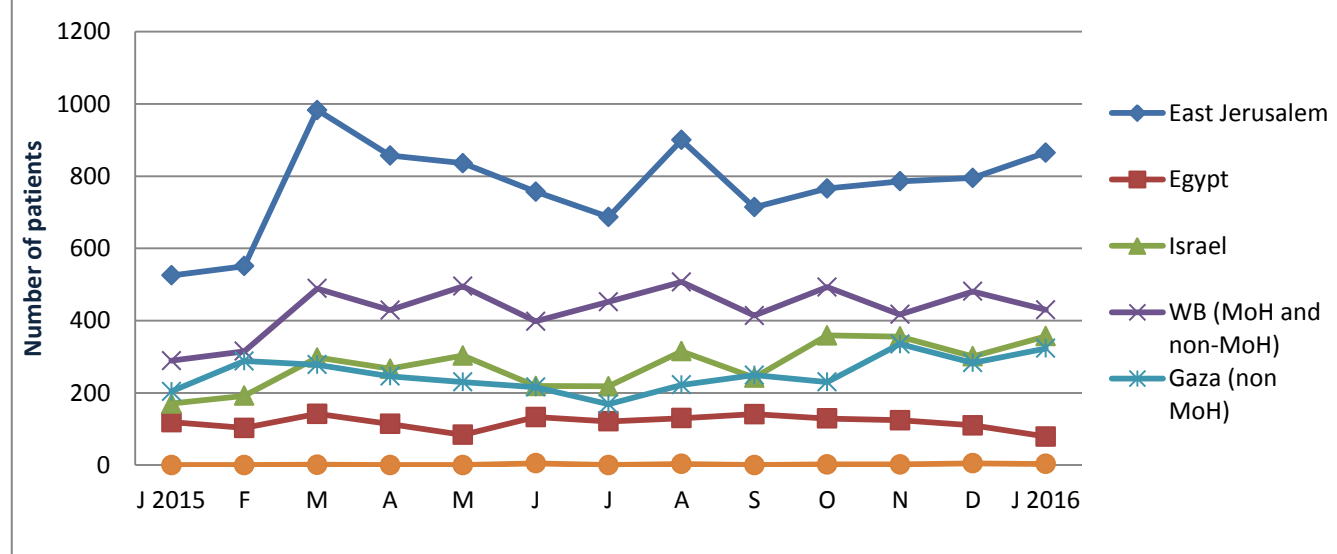
In January, 46.33% of referrals issued for Gaza patients were for females while 53.67% were for males. 28.78% of all referrals were for children under the age of 18 while 20% were for elderly patients over 60 years old.

**Table 1: Palestinian MoH Referrals, by destination, January 2016 compared to 2015 monthly average**

| Referral Destination      | 2015 monthly Average | Jan          | % of change   |
|---------------------------|----------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Gaza (non-MoH facilities) | 251                  | 323          | +28.7%        |
| WB (MoH and non-MoH)      | 477                  | 430          | -10%          |
| East Jerusalem            | 809                  | 865          | +7%           |
| Jordan                    | 3                    | 3            | 0%            |
| Israel                    | 312                  | 357          | +14%          |
| Egypt                     | 139                  | 79           | -43%          |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>1991</b>          | <b>2,057</b> | <b>+ 3.3%</b> |

Source: MoH Medical Referral Directorate, Ramallah, March 1, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

**Chart 1: Trends of referrals of Gaza patients, January 2014-January 2016 (numbers)**



Of the 2,057 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in January, 1,655 (81%) required Israeli permits for access through Erez checkpoint and 79 (4%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and required the Rafah border to be accessible).

The specialties needed for Gaza referrals were mainly in oncology - 437 referrals (21%), hematology - 148 (7%), MRI - 145 (7%), heart catheterization - 136 (7%), pediatrics - 130 (6%), ophthalmology - 123 (6%), orthopedics - 111 (5%), nuclear medicine - 109 (5%), neurosurgery - 82 (4%), cardiology - 72 (4%) and the remaining 564 (27%) were for 22 other specialties.

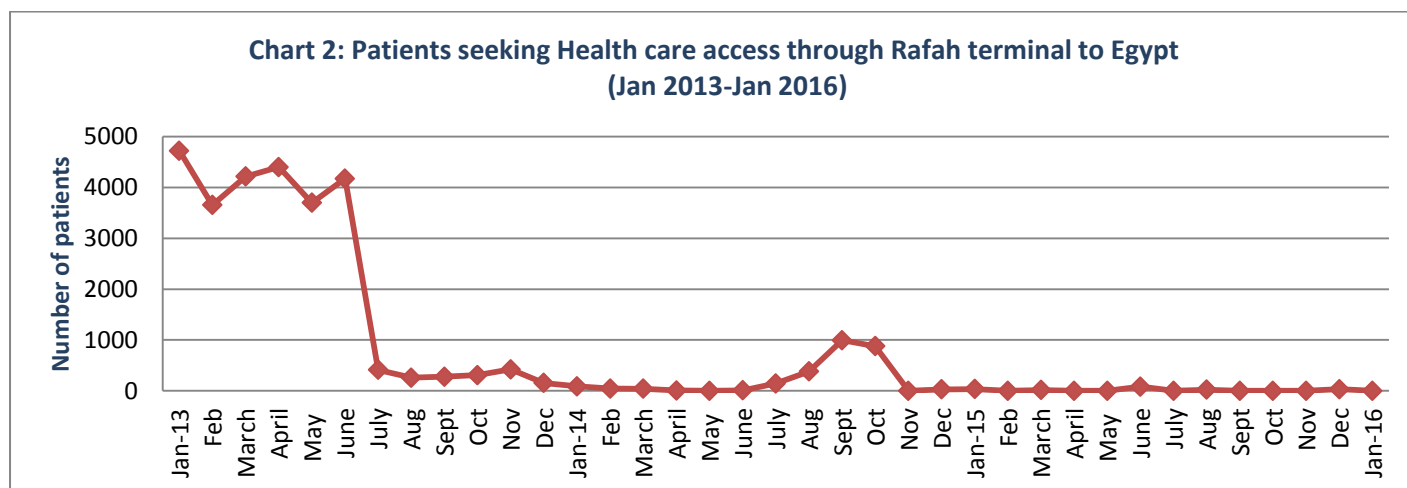
<sup>1</sup> Since October 2015 the referral data used in the WHO monthly reports reflect the financial decision-based data for Gaza patients, as received from the MoH Medical Referral Directorate in Ramallah, rather than the number of unique patients. This data include renewals of referrals for Gaza 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.

The RAD in Ramallah reported an estimated cost of **NIS 10,369,507** for the 2,057 referrals for Gaza patients in January.

## ACCESS

**No access to Egypt during January:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, Rafah border terminal was completely closed in both directions during January. No patients or other travellers for humanitarian reasons were allowed to cross. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza during the month.

In 2015, the Rafah crossing was open on only 26 days for humanitarian cases, allowing only 178 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 (**Chart 2**).



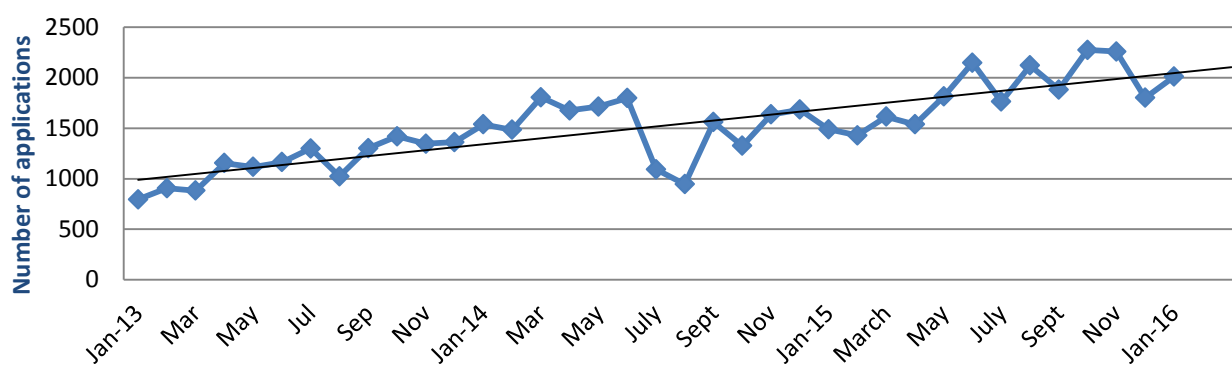
**Access through Erez crossing:** In January, there were 2,011 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care (52.2% males and 47.8% females). 31% were applications for children under 18 years and 15.27% were for elderly people above 60. Permit applications submitted this month were mainly for patients who need health care in oncology 519 (26%), cardiology 202 (10%), pediatrics 170 (8%), orthopedics 168 (8%), ophthalmology 161 (8%), hematology 146 (7%), neurosurgery 127 (6%), and nuclear medicine 80 (4%). The remaining 438 (22%) applications were for 22 other specialties.

Of the total permit applications, 975 (48.48%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, 543 (27%) to the West Bank, 474 (23.57%) to Israel, and 19 (0.94%) to Jordan. The top receiving hospitals in January were Makassed 498 (24.76%), Augusta Victoria 349 (17.35%), Annajah university 233 (11.59%), Tel-Hashomir 136 (6.76%), Al-Ahli hospital in Hebron 111 (5.52%) and Hadassah Ein Karem 102 (5.07%).

The total number in January was 9% higher than the monthly average in 2015. In the past 3 years (**Chart 3**) there has been a trend toward higher demand for access to health care through Erez due to lack of resources in the health system in Gaza and blocked access to Egypt, especially for private patients.

The process of applying for a permit is time-consuming and complicated, and sometimes requires multiple attempts which delays health care. 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. Patients also sometimes reapply after they are denied a permit or if no response is received and the treatment is urgent. January data showed that out of the 2,011 applications submitted in the Palestinian coordination office, 185 (9.2%) applications were repeated attempts.

**Chart 3: Total number of patient permit applications to cross Erez  
(January 2013-January 2016)**



In January, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported that 1,573 (78.22%) applications for permits for patients were approved (**Table 2**), 11% higher than the previous month and slightly higher than the monthly average in 2015. 47 applicants (2.34%) were denied access. 391 (19.44%) did not receive an answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

Permit applications should be submitted to the Israeli district liaison office 7-10 days prior to the hospital appointment date. In January, out of the total 2,011 applications from patients with hospital appointments scheduled during the month, 267 (13.28%) were submitted less than a week before the referral hospital appointment date, 594 (29.54%) applications were submitted 8-14 days before the appointment, 1,012 (50.32%) were 15-30 days before, and 135 (6.71%) were more than 30 days before the hospital appointment. 3 (0.15%) applications were missed.

**Table 2: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS interviews, January 2016**

| Age group        | Total       |             | Approved             |            | Denied            |           | Delayed             |            | Called by GSS*     |           |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------------|------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------|
|                  | F           | M           | F                    | M          | F                 | M         | F                   | M          | F                  | M         |
| 0 - 3            | 81          | 127         | 67                   | 107        | 0                 | 0         | 14                  | 20         | 0                  | 0         |
| 4 - 17           | 195         | 221         | 165                  | 180        | 1                 | 2         | 29                  | 39         | 0                  | 1         |
| 18- 40           | 245         | 263         | 187                  | 177        | 14                | 14        | 44                  | 72         | 18                 | 29        |
| 41 - 60          | 296         | 276         | 239                  | 191        | 6                 | 7         | 51                  | 78         | 17                 | 39        |
| Over 60          | 144         | 163         | 132                  | 128        | 0                 | 3         | 12                  | 32         | 0                  | 10        |
| <b>Sub-total</b> | <b>961</b>  | <b>1050</b> | <b>790</b>           | <b>783</b> | <b>21</b>         | <b>26</b> | <b>150</b>          | <b>241</b> | <b>35</b>          | <b>79</b> |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>2011</b> |             | <b>1573 (78.22%)</b> |            | <b>47 (2.34%)</b> |           | <b>391 (19.44%)</b> |            | <b>114 (5.67%)</b> |           |

\* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH –Gaza

**Table 3** shows that the total patient permit applications in January 2016 were 35% higher than the corresponding month in 2015 while the approval rate was 2.5% lower and denial rate was 1.15% higher than in January 2015.

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

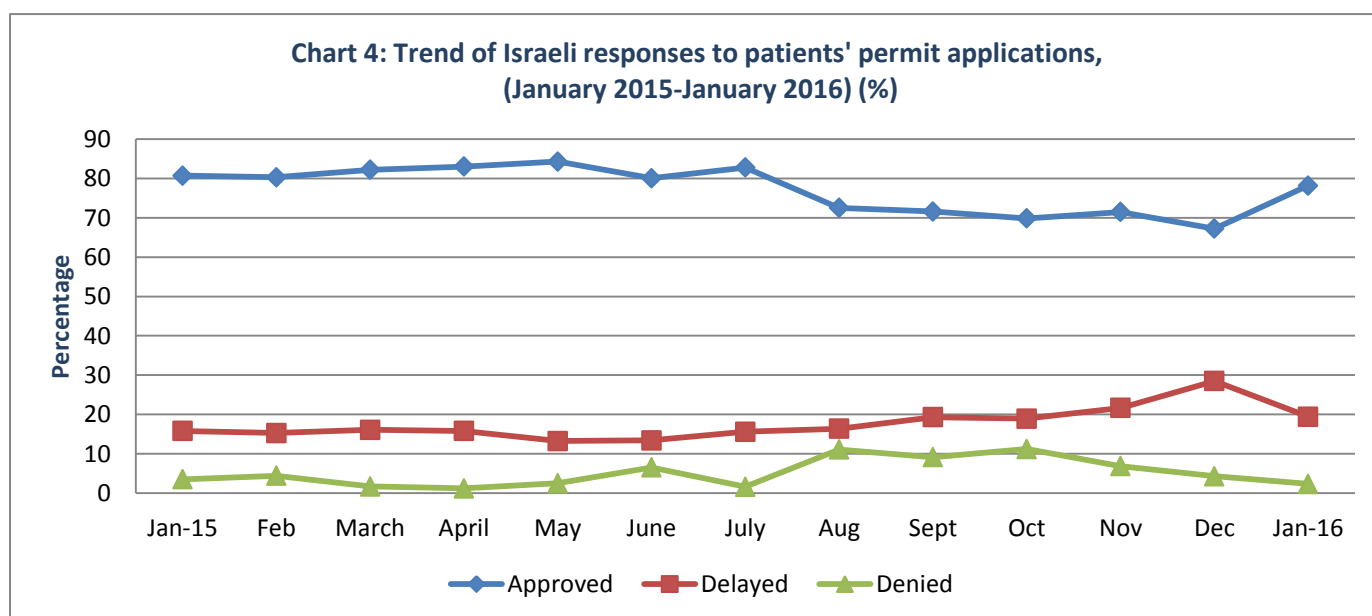
| Period   | January 2015                   |        | January 2016                    |        | Monthly Average 2015          |        | January–December 2015                 |        |
|--|--------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------|--------|
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>1,489</b><br>(F:697; M:792) |        | <b>2,011</b><br>(F:961; M:1050) |        | <b>1845</b><br>(F:860; M:985) |        | <b>22,138</b><br>(F:10,315; M:11,823) |        |
| Approved   | 1,202<br>(F:600; M:602)        | 80.73% | 1,573<br>(F:790; M:783)         | 78.22% | 1414<br>(F:699; M:715)        | 76.64% | 16,970<br>(F:8,389; M:8,581)          | 76.66% |
| Denied   | 52<br>(F:5; M:47)              | 3.49%  | 47<br>(F:21; M:26)              | 2.34%  | 106<br>(F:34; M:72)           | 5.74%  | 1,267<br>(F:403; M:864)               | 5.72%  |
| Delayed  | 235<br>(F:92; M:143)           | 15.78% | 391<br>(F:150; M:241)           | 19.44% | 325<br>(F:127; M:198)         | 17.62% | 3,901<br>(F:1,523; M:2,378)           | 17.62% |
| -- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants) | <b>22</b><br>(F:7; M:15)       | 1.48%  | <b>114</b><br>(F:35; M:79)      | 5.67%  | <b>19</b><br>(F:5; M:14)      | 1.03%  | <b>230</b><br>(F:60; M:170)           | 1.04%  |

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Patient companions:** In January, 2,094 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. 69.63% were approved, similar to the average for 2015. 4.82% were denied and 25.55% were pending. Only one first-degree relative is permitted and permits are now conditional on security interviews for those aged up to 55 years. Hindering access for parents to accompany their sick children in effect delays medical care to children.

**Financial coverage:** 91.99% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in January were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 3.08% were self-funded, and 2.09% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1.34% by Peres Center for Peace, 1.14% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.10% by the Military Medical Services, 0.10% by an insurance company and 0.15% by other organizations.

**Chart 4** shows a decline after July 2015 in Israeli approvals for patients' permit applications and an increase in delays until December 2015 but in January 2016 the approval rate improved somewhat. Denials were significantly decreased but delays were higher compared to 2015 average, possibly due to the increase in requests for security interviews.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

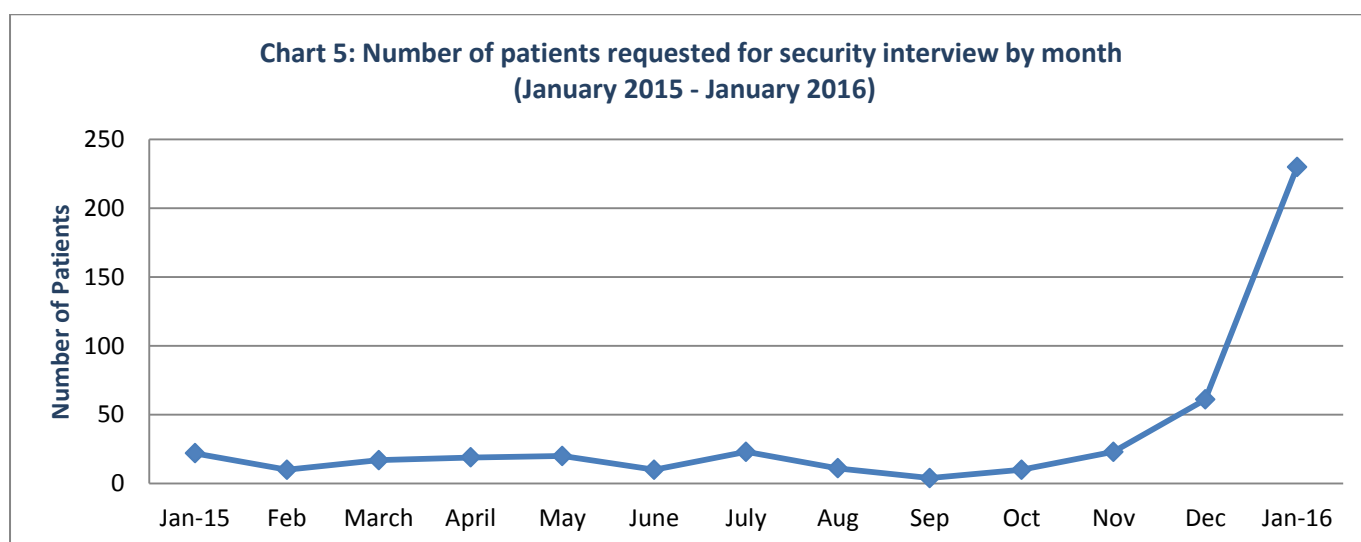
**Denied care:** 47 patients (26 males; 21 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 3 children and 3 patients over 60 years old. Of the denied patients, 35 patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals and 10 in Israel and 2 in Jordan. 42 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH and 5 were self-funded. Of those denied: 4.26% (2 patients) had submitted their applications less than 8 days before the hospital appointment; 25.53% (12) had waited for a response for 8-14 days; 55% (26) waited 15-30 days; and 14.89% (7) patients waited more than 30 days. The denied patients had appointments for neurosurgery (10), oncology (10), cardiology (6), orthopedics (6), and nuclear medicine (3) in addition to 2 patients each for internal medicine, ophthalmology, ENT, general surgery and urology, 1 for hematology and 1 for dermatology.

**Delayed care:** 391 patient applicants (241 males; 150 females) were delayed in reaching health care in January, among them 102 children and 44 patients over the age of 60; they received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 391 patients delayed, 77.75% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 22% in Israel, and 0.26% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in oncology (82), orthopedics (46), neurosurgery (35), cardiology (34), ophthalmology (33), pediatrics (30), hematology (21), nuclear medicine (17), urology (15), nephrology (14), ENT (10), general surgery (9), internal medicine (8), and the remaining (40) were for 15 other specialties.

Out of 391 delayed patient applicants, 9.97% had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date. However, 24.55% waited 8-14 days, 57.29% waited 15-30 days and 7.67% waited more than 30 days for a

response to their permit request. 0.51% (2) applications were missed. 21 patients out of the delayed were eventually approved late, within the first 2 weeks of February 2016.

**Security Interviews:** 114 patients (79 males; 35 females), including a male child from the age group 4-17, and 10 men over 60 were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). 34 were approved after interviews. The number of patients requested for security interview as prerequisite to process their permit applications has increased dramatically since November 2015 (**Chart 5**). The number of patients requested for GSS in January was 600% of the monthly average of 2015 and the highest monthly number since November 2009 when 122 patients were requested for GSS. According to the Palestinian civil affairs and the district liaison office, this increase might be attributed to a recent replacement of intelligence officers at Erez and to widening of the age group for security clearance of companions from 16-35 years to 16-55 years.



**Patients and companions crossed Erez:** The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,490 Gaza patients (and 1,406 companions) crossed Erez in January to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals; of these, 78 patients were transferred by ambulance (using two ambulances and back-to-back procedures), with 73 companions. Erez crossing was open for 27 days during regular day-time working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays) in January.