



*10 patients were permitted to cross to Egypt in June 2014 .  
(Photo: Rafah crossing, Gaza Strip, July 10, 2014.) ©WHO oPt*

## Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD 6 (July 17, 2014)

### Summary: June 2014

#### Access

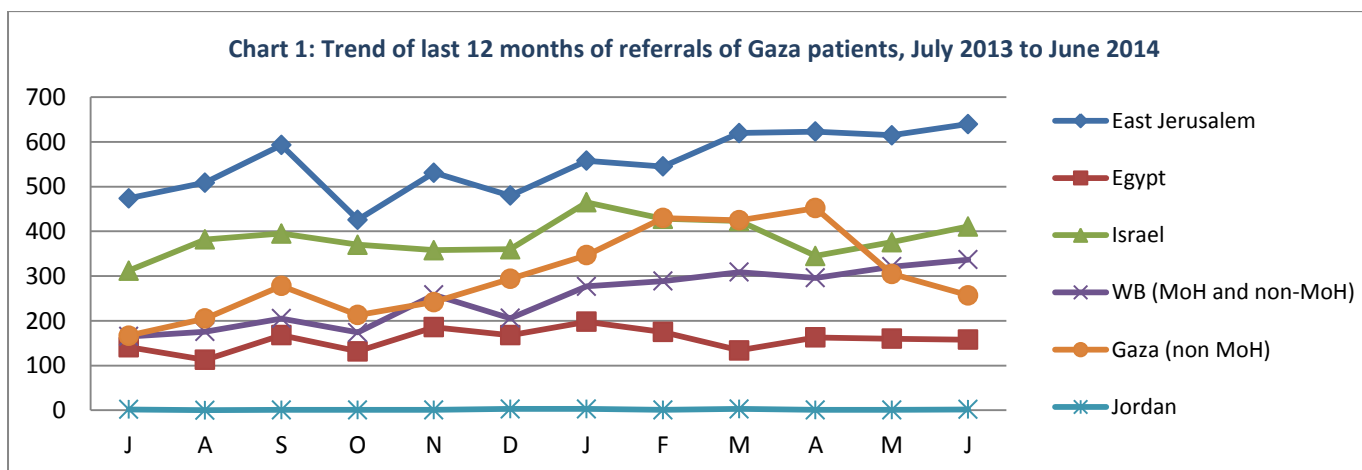
- **High need for access through Erez:** In June the volume of patient applications to Israeli authorities to cross Erez checkpoint for health access (1,799 patients) was 57% higher than the monthly average in 2013. Monthly trends in 2014 have been the highest since the WHO began monitoring access through Erez. The increase in demand reflects the closure of the Rafah border to Egypt and lack of drugs, especially chemotherapy and lack of medical disposables.
- **Permit approval rate significantly decreased:** 79.82% of patient applicants were approved a permit in June 2014, more than 5% lower than the average of Jan-May 2014. 56 (3.11%) patients (20 females and 36 males, including 3 children and 8 elderly) were denied permits. 17.07% of patients who applied (307 patients: 113 females and 194 males, including 71 children and 17 elderly people over 60) received no response to their applications and their medical treatment was delayed as a result.
- **10 patients interrogated:** 9 men and 1 woman aged between 18-60 years were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit to cross Erez. One patient so far was granted a permit following the security interviews in June.
- **Limited patient access through Rafah:** 10 Gaza patients were able to travel to Egypt through Rafah in June, compared to more than 4,177 in June 2013, before the closure.
- **Cancer patient denied access to continue ongoing treatment in Jerusalem (*case study, page 5*).**

#### Referrals

- **Decrease in MoH referrals:** Total MoH referrals of Gaza patients (1,778) to outside facilities were lower than January to April levels. Referrals to the West Bank and East Jerusalem were at the highest levels since the beginning of the year, while referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza were at their lowest level in 2014 following repair of the MoH MRI equipment. June referrals were 27% higher than the monthly average in 2013.
- **Medical reasons for referrals:** The top ten specialties requiring referrals for treatment were: oncology—308 referrals (17.06%), nuclear medicine—146 (8.09%), ophthalmology—136 (7.53%), heart catheterization—136 (7.53%), orthopaedics—126 (6.98%), paediatrics—115 (6.37%), MRI —106 (5.87%), haematology—92 (5.1%), neurosurgery—78 (4.32%), and heart surgery—76 (4.21%). The remaining 27% of referrals were to 20 other specialities.
- **Gender gap:** The gender gap in referrals continued: 54.29% male patients versus 45.71% female patients. 27.31% of all referrals were for children aged 0-17 years and 19.72% were for patients aged over 60 years.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for June 2014:** NIS 9,640,376.

## Referrals reflect pressure on public health system

The Ministry of Health (MoH) in Gaza issued 1,805 patient referrals to outside hospitals in June, less than the monthly average in the first 5 months of 2014 but still 29% higher than the monthly average for 2013. Referrals dropped to non-MoH health facilities in Gaza (257; 14.24%) after repair of the MRI machine in the European Gaza Hospital (EGH) reduced previous high need for MRI referrals. Referrals to East Jerusalem (640; 35.46%) and to West Bank hospitals (337; 18.67%) were at the highest level since the WHO started to monitor referrals in 2005. Referrals to Israel (411; 22.77%) rose to the monthly average for 2014 (407). Only two referrals were issued to Jordan during June; the MoH had to stop referrals to Jordan for new patients in 2012 due to accrued PA debts. Referrals to Egypt (158; 8.75%) remained below average, reflecting the closed border at Rafah since July 2013 and dramatic reduction in humanitarian access (**Chart 1** and **Table 1**). Referrals inside Gaza were mainly for heart catheterization, MRI, rehabilitation, urology, pediatric, and neurology.



**Table 1: Palestinian MoH referrals, by destination, January – June 2014**

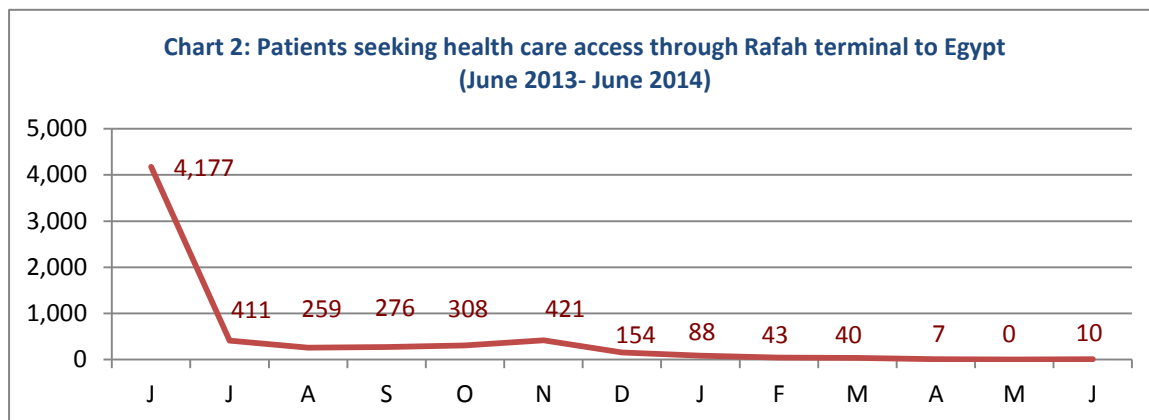
Referral Destination	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	Total	2013 monthly average
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	347	430	425	452	305	257	<b>2,216</b>	206
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	277	289	309	296	321	337	<b>1,829</b>	180
East Jerusalem	558	545	620	623	615	640	<b>3,601</b>	482
Jordan	3	1	3	1	1	2	<b>11</b>	1
Israel	465	428	423	345	376	411	<b>2,448</b>	306
Egypt	198	175	134	163	160	158	<b>988</b>	226
<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>11,093</b>	<b>1,401</b>

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza

89.75% of referrals were for in-patient admissions in hospitals and 10.25% were for out-patient services. 27.31% of patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 19.72% were elderly patients over 60. Female referral patients were 45.71% of the total. 55.7% of all Gaza Strip referrals were for Gaza governorate residents. 74.6% of application for referral were processed by RAD within one week, 12.5% from 1-2 weeks, the rest 13% took longer. Referral destinations needing coordination for exit through Erez crossing were 1,390 (77%) out of 1,805 referrals during June.

**Patients' access to Egypt is limited:** Although the MoH issued 158 referrals to Egyptian hospitals in June, only 10 patients with 10 companions allowed crossing into Egypt. Rafah crossing was partially opened only on 2 days for humanitarian cases in June where 1591 people crossed towards Egypt including 10 patients. The terminal was partially opened for 7 days exclusively for pilgrims with special coordination to travel through Egypt, allowing 2,542 Saudi-bound pilgrims to cross Rafah terminal during June (**Chart 2**).

A shipment of medical aid donated by Algeria was allowed to Gaza during June, the first since July 2013 but no medical delegation entered Gaza since that time.



### Access through Erez

**Volume:** The volume of patient applications in June for health access through Erez was 57% higher than the monthly average in 2013, and the second highest month for referrals in 2014 after a peak of 1,806 patient applications in March (**Chart 3**). In June, 79.82% of patients' permit applications were approved reflecting a significant increase in denying and delaying patients' applications to access healthcare. The average approval rate for 2013 was (88%) (**Table 2**).

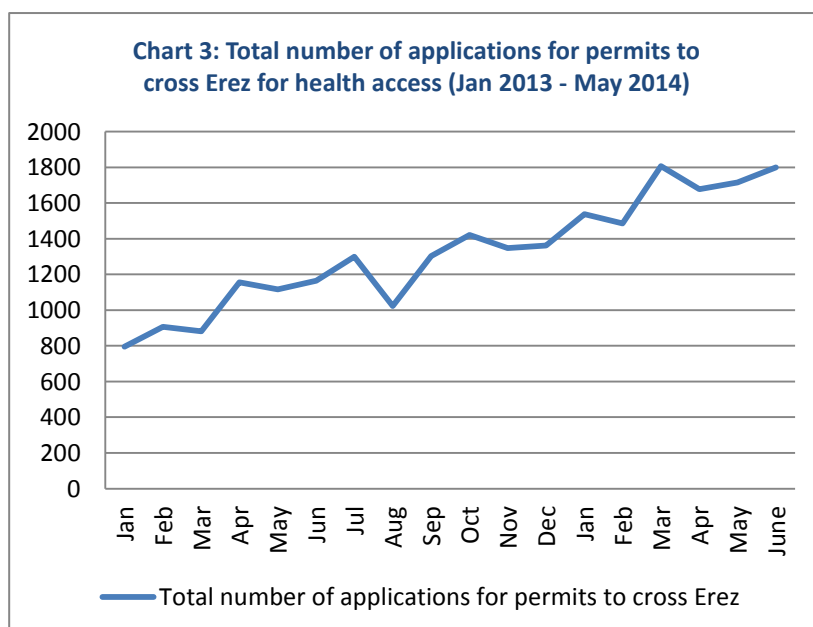
**Table 2: Decisions by Israeli District Liaison Office on patient permit applications to cross Erez by age, sex and GSS risk, June 2014**

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called for GSS interrogation	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	81	104	71	86	0	1	10	17	0	0
4 - 17	152	189	131	164	0	2	21	23	0	0
18 - 40	213	250	146	128	7	17	60	105	1	8
41 - 60	244	257	223	203	8	13	13	41	0	1
Over 60	146	163	132	152	5	3	9	8	0	0
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>836</b>	<b>963</b>	<b>703</b>	<b>733</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,799</b>		<b>1,436 (79.82%)</b>		<b>56 (3.11%)</b>		<b>307 (17.07%)</b>		<b>10 (0.56%)</b>	

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

The volume of permit applications for the period from January-June this year was 66% higher than the same period in 2013, while the approval rate for the same period was 2% lower (**Table 3**).

**Denied:** 56 patients (20 females; 36 males) were denied access through Erez to specialized hospitals during June, including 3 children and 8 elderly people over 60, the highest number of patient denials in 2014. Six patients were denied health access permits in the first half of 2013 compared to 221 patients denied in the first half of 2014. Denied patients had been referred for orthopedics, neurosurgery, ophthalmology, internal medicine, and other specialties. 46 patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 6 in Israel, and 4 in Jordan. 51 were funded by the MoH, 4 were self-funded and 1 by Physicians for Human Rights. 27 patients waited 8-14 days, and 12 patients waited 15-30 days to receive the negative response on their applications.



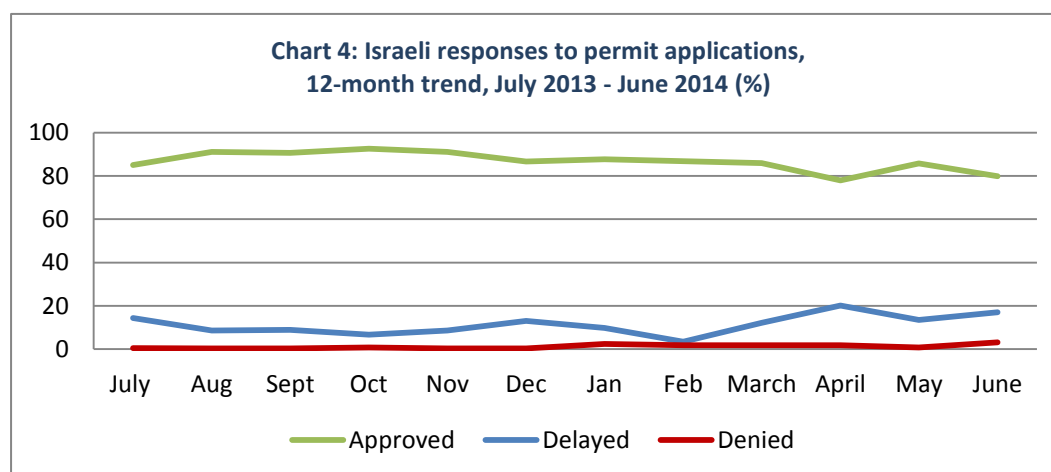
**Delayed:** Patients should apply 10 days prior to their appointments and Israeli authorities should give a response to applicants within that time. According to the Palestinian District Coordination office, 307 patient applicants (194 males; 113 females), including 71 children and 17 patients over the age of 60, received no response and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 307 patients delayed, 48.86% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, 26.06% in West Bank hospitals, 22.8% in Israel and 2.28% in Jordan. The Ministry of Health financially covered 92% of these referrals while 6% were self-funded and the remaining 2% were funded by other organizations.

Of the patients delayed, 41% of applications (126 of 307) were submitted within 1 week prior to the scheduled appointment. Of those delayed, 181 patients were still awaiting a response after two weeks and 1 after one month. The delayed patients were mainly referred for treatments in ophthalmology, orthopedics, oncology, neurosurgery, nuclear medicine, pediatrics, cardiology, hematology, ENT and urology. Out of the 307 applications, 37 were eventually approved but after the date for their scheduled appointment, delaying their medical care.

In June, according to the Palestinian Coordination Office data, 42.75% of all patients apply for permits from 1 to 7 days before their appointment, and 57.25% of patients apply more than one week before their appointments.

**Security Interviews:** 10 patients (9 males; 1 female) were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) as a condition to process their application. As of the first week of July, one had been granted a permit following the interview.

In June, 93.22% of all patients applying for Israeli permits were referrals from the Palestinian MoH, 4.45% were self-funded, and the remaining patients were funded by the Peres Center for Peace, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, Nour Al-Alam foundation, and MSFs. 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 that are not available in the hospital supply.



**Table 3: Decisions by Israeli District Liaison Office on permit requests to cross Erez, by response, sex of applicant and comparison with corresponding periods in 2013 and 2014 (number and %)**

Period	June 2013		June 2014		January-June 2013		January – May 2014	
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,165</b> (F:535; M:630)		<b>1,799</b> (F:836; M:963)		<b>6,022</b> (F:2,858; M:3,164)		<b>10,019</b> (F:4,644; M:5,375)	
Approved	985 (F:464; M:521)	84.55%	1,436 (F:703; M:733)	79.82%	5,178 (F:2,519; M:2,659)	85.98%	8,406 (F:4,081; M:4,325)	83.90%
Denied	0 (F: 0; M: 0)	0.00%	56 (F:20; M:36)	3.11%	6 (F:2; M:4)	0.11%	221 (F:77; M:144)	2.21%
Delayed	180 (F:71; M:109)	15.45%	307 (F:113; M:194)	17.07%	838 (F:336; M:502)	13.91%	1392 (F:486; M:906)	13.89%
-- called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	17 (F:3; M:14)	1.46%	10 (F:1; M:9)	0.56%	86 (F:21; M:65)	1.43%	90 (F:11; M:79)	0.81%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

### Access through exit points: Erez and Rafah

The Palestinian General Authority for Civil Affairs registered 1,252 patients and 1,211 companions travelling through Erez checkpoint to hospitals in Israel, oPt or Jordan during June; most patients had to walk through the terminal, while 85 patients were transferred via back-to-back ambulances.

Rafah terminal was partially open for humanitarian cases only on 2 days. The ambulance station at Rafah terminal reported that 10 patients with 10 companions were allowed to cross to Egypt during June out of 1,591 humanitarian travellers. Pilgrims could cross on 7 days with special coordination; 2,542 pilgrims crossed during June (**Table 4**).

**Table 4: Gaza Health Access Crossings, June 2014**

Point of exit	Patient Exit	Crossing by ambulance (back-to-back transfers)	Days open in month
Erez crossing (north) via Israel)*	1,252 patients/1,211 companions	85 patients	Open 25 days; closed 5 days (4 Saturdays and 1 day for Jewish holidays)
Rafah crossing (south) to Egypt)**		10 patients and 10 companions	Closed 28 days. (The terminal opened for pilgrims on 7 days and 2 days for humanitarian cases. 2,542 pilgrims and 1,591 humanitarian cases crossed through Rafah towards Egypt.

\*Source: Palestinian General Authority for Civil Affairs

\*\*Source: Emergency Medical Services of the MoH, Gaza, Rafah terminal

### Cancer patient denied access out of Gaza to continue his treatment

Israeli authorities denied a permit for a cancer patient from Gaza who had been undergoing treatment at Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH) in East Jerusalem over the past year. Khalil Suboh, a 46-year-old father of 5 children and a former ambulance driver, has been suffering from laryngeal cancer for five years. His symptoms appeared shortly after he was affected by a phosphorus bomb while evacuating a patient in the 2008-9 war in Gaza. Eventually he was found to have a malignant tumor in his larynx. He was referred to Egypt for surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy and treated on four occasions. Due to travel restrictions through Rafah in 2013, he continued his treatment at AVH and traveled on four occasions, in October, November and December 2013 and again in January 2014 when he stayed for three months. "I returned to Gaza on April 10, 2014 and immediately was admitted to the hospital with anemia," said Khalil. He is suffering from weakness, difficulty swallowing, shortness of breath and loss of appetite.



Since May Khalil has tried to obtain a permit to continue with his chemotherapy sessions. He applied three times in May and June 2014 for a permit to travel through Erez checkpoint; twice he was told that his application was "under study" and then in June he was told his application was denied. Khalil said, "I do not have any problem with security issues. I don't know why they denied my permit this time." His family has a poor socio-economic situation even for Rafah refugee camp. Khalil worked 15 years for the PRCS emergency medical services transporting patients to hospitals but his illness and long absences from work during treatment caused him to lose his job in 2012.

"My story with the disease started on the first day of 2009 during the war. I was on duty that evening when we received a call to help evacuate people exposed to a white phosphorus attack in the village of Khuzaa'a east of Khan Younis. I was exposed to the phosphorus myself and lost consciousness for four hours. I spent several days in the intensive care unit," he said. After two months, he complained of shortness of breath and throat pain and his ENT physician in Gaza found small masses on the vocal cords and larynx.

The Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD) referred Khalil to Egypt in June 2010 where he had surgery and speech therapy. In April 2011 his symptoms returned and he was again referred to Egypt. A biopsy showed the tumor was malignant and he received chemotherapy and radiation therapy. "I spent 8 months in Egypt for treatment and I improved significantly," he said. Khalil made two more trips to Egypt for follow up in 2012. In 2013, when his condition deteriorated he asked the RAD for a change in the referral hospital due to travel difficulties crossing into Egypt. The RAD referred him to Augusta Victoria hospital (AVH) in Jerusalem, the Ministry of Health's main referral center for cancer treatment. He was returning for his fifth appointment at AVH when he was denied a permit to exit Gaza. Khalil referred his case to the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) for an appeal for his permit.