

*Rafah border, October 2013 ©WHO oPt*



## Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD 3 (April 28, 2014)

### Summary: March 2014

#### Access

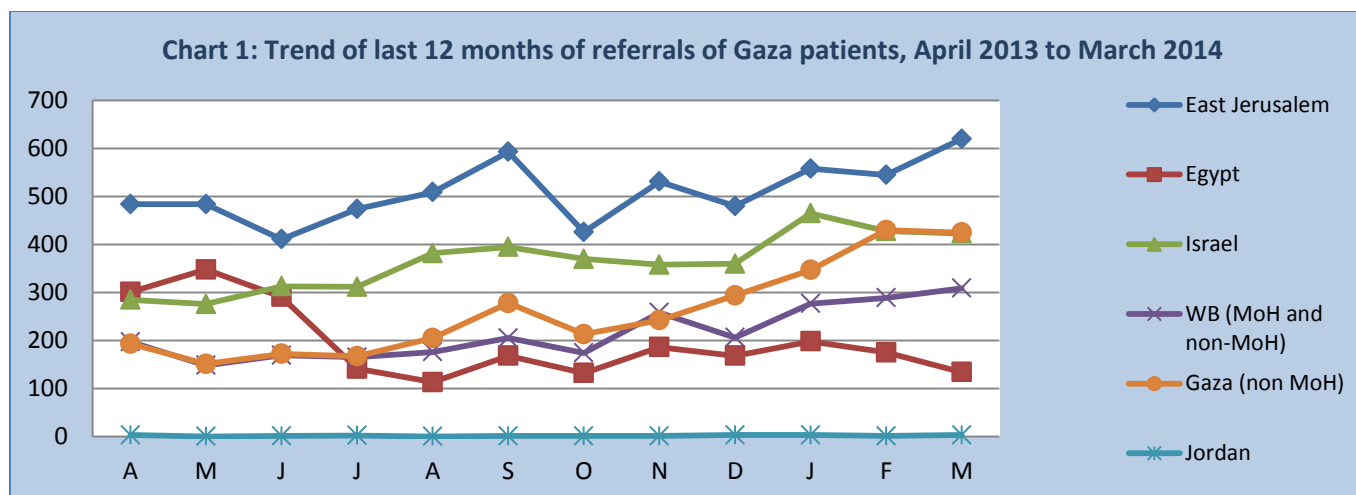
- **Increased access need through Erez:** The number of patients' applications submitted in March to Israeli authorities for health access through Erez checkpoint was the highest since the WHO began monitoring access in 2005; in the first quarter of 2014 the number was 87% higher than for the same period in 2013. The increase in need reflects the continuing problems of access through Rafah border to Egypt and lack of drugs, especially chemotherapy and lack of medical disposables.
- **Drop in approval rates of permits:** 85.99% of patient applicants received a permit in March 2014, 1.83% of applicants (33 patients: 12 females, 21 males, including 8 children) were denied permits, and 12.18% of applicants (220 patients: 69 females and 151 males) received no response to their applications, including 31 children whose medical treatment was delayed as a result.
- **18 patients interrogated:** 18 patients (16 males, 2 females) were requested to attend interviews with Israeli security after applying for a permit to cross Erez. Only one patient had been granted a permit so far following security interviews in March.
- **Three referral patients died in March while waiting for approval to exit Gaza, including a young woman who died one day after being interviewed by Israeli security officials (see case studies p.5).**
- **Further drop in access through Rafah:** Only 40 Gaza patients were able to travel to Egypt through Rafah in March, compared to more than 4,000 in March 2013, before the closure.

#### Referrals

- **Increase in MoH referrals:** Total MoH referrals of Gaza patients (1,914) were the highest recorded and 37% higher than the monthly average in 2013. MoH referrals to health facilities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem hospitals were the highest recorded in recent years.
- **Medical reasons for referrals:** The top ten needed specialties were for treatment in the following specialties: oncology--308 referrals (16.09%), MRI--286 (14.94%), nuclear medicine--154 (8.05%), orthopaedics--136 (7.11%), ophthalmology--119 (6.22%), heart catheterization--119 (6.22%), paediatrics--104 (5.43%), neurosurgery--91 (4.75%), haematology--85 (4.44%), and heart surgery --65 (3.40%). The remaining 23.35% of referrals were to 21 other specialties.
- **Gender gap:** There was a gender gap in referrals: 53.87% male patients versus 46.13% female patients. 22.42% of all referrals were children aged 0-17 years and 18.55% were patients aged over 60 years.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for March 2014:** NIS 15,233,101.

## Referrals reflect pressure on public health system

The Ministry of Health (MoH) in Gaza referred 1,914 patients to outside hospitals in March continuing a trend of increased number of referrals. March referrals were the highest in one month since the WHO began monitoring access to health care outside Gaza in 2005, and 37% higher than the monthly average for 2013. Referrals to East Jerusalem (32.4%; 620) and to West Bank hospitals (309; 16.14%) were the highest since 2005. Referrals to Israel was slightly decreased (22.1%; 423) after peaking in January 2014 (**Chart 1**). Referrals to Egypt were low at 7% (137), reflecting the unstable border and internal situation in Egypt prevalent since July 2013 (**Table 1**). Referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza (22.2%; 425) remained high and were primarily for MRI (265), heart catheterization (98), rehabilitation (21) and pediatrics (10). The remaining 31 were to 13 different specialties.



| Referral Destination      | Jan          | Feb          | March        | Total        | 2013 monthly average |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Gaza (non-MoH facilities) | 347          | 430          | 425          | <b>1,202</b> | 206                  |
| WB (MoH and non-MoH)      | 277          | 289          | 309          | <b>875</b>   | 180                  |
| East Jerusalem            | 558          | 545          | 620          | <b>1,723</b> | 482                  |
| Jordan                    | 3            | 1            | 3            | <b>7</b>     | 1                    |
| Israel                    | 465          | 428          | 423          | <b>1,316</b> | 306                  |
| Egypt                     | 198          | 175          | 134          | <b>507</b>   | 226                  |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>1,848</b> | <b>1,868</b> | <b>1,914</b> | <b>5,630</b> | <b>1,401</b>         |

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza.

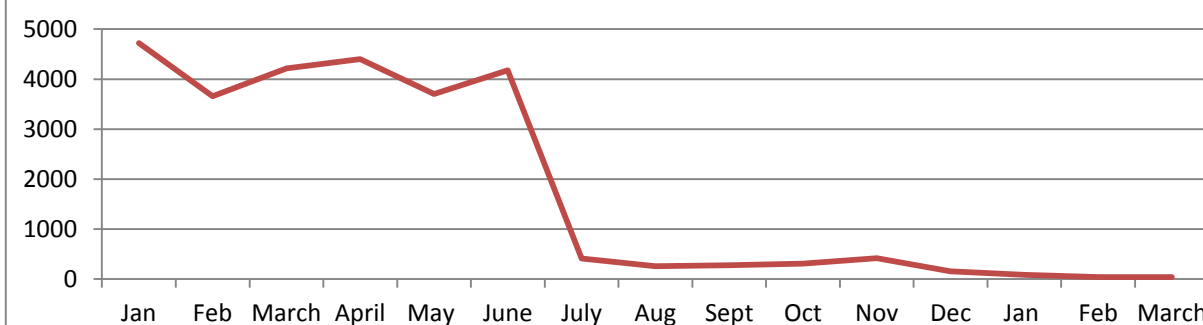
The Palestinian Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department processed 82.13% of the 1,914 applications for referrals in March within 7 days, 8.73% from 8-14 days, 2.1% from 15-21 days and 2% from 22-31 days; the remaining 5% took longer than one month. 88.3% of referrals were for in-patient admissions in hospitals and 11.7% were for outpatient services. 22.4% of patients who received referrals were under the age of 18 and 18.55% were elderly patients over 60. Referrals of female patients constituted 46.1% of the total. The number of patients who needed coordination to exit through Erez crossing was 1,355 (70.8%) out of 1,914 referrals during March.

## Limited access to Egypt

Rafah terminal was closed in March, with the exception of 3 half-days for travelers with humanitarian needs (patients, students and foreign passport-holders) and 8 days for pilgrims only. Of the 3,758 travellers who left Gaza through Rafah terminal in March, only 40 were patients (2%), the lowest monthly figure recorded in a 9-month downward trend of patients using that route following Egypt's closure policy (**Chart 2**). 1,550 (41%) of the travelers were pilgrims.

People in the waiting area on the Egyptian side of the terminal were also allowed to return with pilgrims. Since July 10, 2013, crossing hours have been restricted to 9 am to 2 pm. No medical delegates or medical aid passed through the terminal during March. Only one medical shipment, in November, has passed through Rafah since July 2013.

**Chart 2: Patients seeking health care access through Rafah terminal to Egypt  
(January 2013-March 2014)**



## Access through Erez

The volume of patient applications in March to cross Erez for health access was 57.3% higher than the monthly average in 2013.

In March 2014, 86% of patient applications to cross Erez were approved (**Table 2**). 33 patients were denied access through Erez to specialized hospitals in the West Bank including East Jerusalem, Israel and Jordan --- 10 times the monthly average of denials in 2013.

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

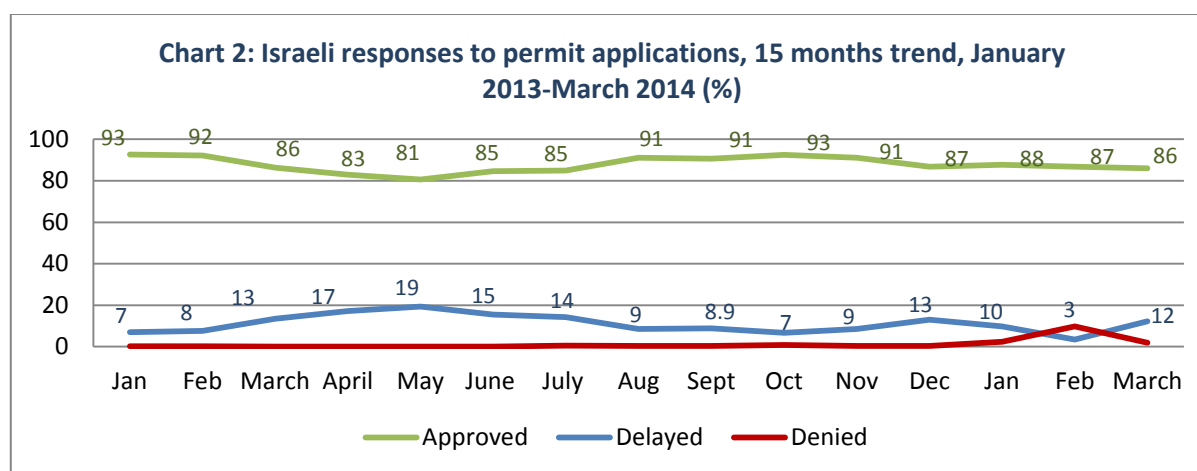
| Age group        | Total       |            | Approved              |            | Denied            |           | Delayed             |            | Called for GSS interrogation |           |
|------------------|-------------|------------|-----------------------|------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|------------|------------------------------|-----------|
|                  | F           | M          | F                     | M          | F                 | M         | F                   | M          | F                            | M         |
| 0 - 3            | 58          | 110        | 52                    | 99         | 2                 | 1         | 4                   | 10         | 0                            | 0         |
| 4 - 17           | 143         | 176        | 132                   | 165        | 3                 | 2         | 8                   | 9          | 0                            | 1         |
| 18- 40           | 241         | 267        | 199                   | 165        | 4                 | 9         | 38                  | 93         | 2                            | 11        |
| 41 - 60          | 257         | 266        | 240                   | 224        | 2                 | 7         | 15                  | 35         | 0                            | 3         |
| Over 60          | 122         | 166        | 117                   | 160        | 1                 | 2         | 4                   | 4          | 0                            | 1         |
| <b>Sub-total</b> | <b>821</b>  | <b>985</b> | <b>740</b>            | <b>813</b> | <b>12</b>         | <b>21</b> | <b>69</b>           | <b>151</b> | <b>2</b>                     | <b>16</b> |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>1806</b> |            | <b>1,553 (85.99%)</b> |            | <b>33 (1.83%)</b> |           | <b>220 (12.18%)</b> |            | <b>18 (0.1%)</b>             |           |

Source: District coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

The 33 patients (12 females; 21 males) denied included 8 children and 3 patients over 60 years. They had been referred mainly for treatment in orthopedics, cardiology, internal medicine, pediatrics, neurology, neurosurgery, oncology, ophthalmology, dermatology, ENT, general surgery and nuclear medicine. 25 had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 3 in Israel and 5 in Jordan. 26 were funded by the MoH, and 7 were self-funded.

According to the Palestinian District Coordination office, 220 patient applications were financially covered by MoH and private patients (12.18%), including 31 children and 8 patients over the age of 60, received no response; 31% of these applicants were females. Of the 220 delayed applications, 42.27% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, 31.36% in West Bank hospitals, 20% in Israel and 6.36% in Jordan. The Israeli authorities should give a response to applicants within 10 days. Of those delayed, 46 patients were still awaiting a response after two weeks.

18 patients, including 2 females, were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) as a condition to process their application. To date, only one patient in March had been granted a permit following the interview.



The volume of permit applications for health access in March was double that in March 2013 and the approval rate slightly lower (**Table 3**).

**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                                                | March 2013            |        | March 2014              |        | January-March 2013         |        | January – March 2014    |        |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|-------------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| Total                                                 | 882<br>(F:435; M:447) |        | 1,806<br>(F:821; M:985) |        | 2,585<br>( F:1239; M:1346) |        | 4829<br>(F:2236;M:2593) |        |
| Approved                                              | 762<br>(F:382; M:380) | 86.4%  | 1,553<br>(F:740; M:813) | 85.99% | 2,336<br>(F:1137; M:1199)  | 90.37% | 4192<br>(F:2039;M:2153) | 86.81% |
| Denied                                                | 1<br>(F: 1; M: 0)     | 0.11%  | 33<br>(F: 12; M:21)     | 1.83%  | 5<br>(F:2; M:3)            | 0.19%  | 120<br>(F:38;M:82)      | 2.48%  |
| Delayed                                               | 119<br>(F:52; M:67)   | 13.49% | 220<br>(F:69; M:151)    | 12.18% | 244<br>(F:100; M:144)      | 9.44%  | 517<br>(F:159;M:358)    | 10.71% |
| -- called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants) | 11<br>(F:4;M:7)       | 1.25%  | 18<br>(F:2; M:16)       | 0.1%   | 40<br>(F:8; M:32)          | 1.55%  | 64<br>(F:8;M:56)        | 1.33%  |

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

In March, 92.08% of patients applying for Israeli permits were referrals from the Palestinian MoH, 5.15% 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 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 in the hospital supply.

### Access through exit points: Erez and Rafah

The Palestinian General Authority for Civil Affairs registered 1,452 patients travelling through Erez checkpoint to Israel, oPt or Jordan during March; 63 patients were transferred via back-to-back ambulances. The ambulance station at Rafah terminal reported that 30 patients travelled by regular bus and 10 patients were transferred by ambulance from the Palestinian side to the Egyptian side of the terminal during March (**Table 4**).

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

| Point of exit                  | Patient Exit                                                       | Crossing by ambulance (back-to-back transfers)      | Days open in month                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Erez crossing (north-Israel)*  | 1,452 patients/1,348 companions                                    | 63 patients                                         | Open 26 days; closed 5 days (5 Saturdays)                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Rafah crossing (south-Egypt)** | 30 patients/23 companions travelled by buses as regular travellers | 10 patients /15 companions transferred by ambulance | Closed 28 days. Open 3 half-days (hours restricted to 9 am-2 pm). (The terminal was open for 8 days for pilgrims only, of which 4 days were only for returning pilgrims and people on hold in the Egyptian side of the terminal.) |

\*Source: Palestinian General Authority for Civil Affairs

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

## **Young mother dies of critical heart condition following Israeli security interview for access permit**

Asia Mohamed Yousif Al-Sharatha, from Ezbit Abed Rabbu, Jabalia, 28 years-old, the mother of a 14-month-old daughter, died in Kamal Adwan hospital in North Gaza on March 10, 2014, one day after being interrogated by Israeli security officials. Asia had been diagnosed 6 months earlier with severe rheumatic heart disease affecting 3 valves of her heart. She required a biological valve replacement that is unavailable in Gaza, in addition to triple valve repair surgery and so was referred by a Gaza cardiac surgeon for treatment abroad, on February 4, 2014, then received financial approval from the Ministry of Health and secured an urgent appointment at Al-Ahli hospital in Hebron for February 19, 2014. Immediately after receiving the appointment, the family submitted an application for a permit in the coordination office in Gaza on February 11, 2014. After one week, the Palestinian coordination department informed the family that Asia was required for an Israeli General Security Services interview at Erez on March 9, 2014. Asia went to the interview, accompanied by her mother, at 9 am. Asia attended the interview alone while her mother waited for her until she returned at 3 pm.

According to Asia's father, Asia said she was asked questions about family members, especially about her father, and was told to relay to him a serious threat from the GSS. She was very upset during and after the GSS interview. In the security corridor, Asia entered and exited the terminal using the small electric go-cart, but during her walk to the interrogation area she became very tired and had to take frequent rests. She returned home exhausted and frightened. At midnight she complained of severe chest pain and vomited blood, and her family took her to the nearby Kamal Adwan hospital where she was admitted at once. However, her condition deteriorated and she died at 9 a.m. the same day. According to the coordination office, in September 2013, Asia had previously submitted applications for a health access permit for a hospital appointment, but her access was first denied, and then made conditional on attending a security interview, which she did not accept at the time.

## **Breast cancer patient dies after 6 weeks of delay in access to Egypt**

Breast cancer patient Naifa Saber Abdulaziz Shahin, 64 years old, from Deir al-Balah, died on March 7, 2014, while waiting for her turn to travel to Egypt for medical treatment, six weeks after registering for humanitarian access. Naifa had surgery for breast cancer in April 2012 at a private center in Gaza, followed by chemotherapy in Shifa hospital and was referred in Egypt for radiotherapy treatment in June 2012. On January 14, 2014, she was admitted to Shifa hospital with severe headache; a CT scan showed two brain lesions. On January 19, her treating physician recommended that she have surgery and radiotherapy in an advanced center. Four days later, the Referral department approved financial coverage for the treatment in Egypt. Then Naifa's brother and niece registered Naifa and themselves on the waiting lists for humanitarian travel to Egypt --- lists of the Emergency Medical Services of the Ministry of Health and of the Ministry of Interior --- and waited for the border to open and their turn to travel. During the 6 weeks of waiting, Naifa's health deteriorated. She was admitted several times to Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir Al-Balah after suffering convulsions. Naifa became gradually weaker and remained at home until March 6, when she was admitted to hospital in a critical condition. She died the following morning, March 7, 2014, still waiting to access medical treatment in Egypt.

## **Three-month-old infant dies while waiting 6 weeks for access via Egypt to Turkey**

Ahmed Amar Shafiq Abu Nahel, three months old, died in his home in Shati refugee camp in Gaza of congenital heart anomalies, 6 weeks after his family applied for approval to travel through Rafah for his medical treatment in Turkey.

Ahmad was born on December 3, 2013, and admitted the next day to Al-Naser pediatric hospital in a critical condition. The pediatric hospital requested that the infant have immediate urgent referral to an outside hospital for genetic and metabolic studies and medical management. The Ministry of Health approved financial coverage at Sheba medical center in Israel and the infant, accompanied by his grandmother, received a permit to travel on December 16, 2013. The child remained in hospital until December 26, 2013, when he was discharged with a recommendation for a heart transplant, not available in Sheba or in Gaza. The baby returned to Gaza and was treated symptomatically with oxygen therapy and medications at Rantisi pediatric hospital. The father, who works in administration in the Ministry of Interior, was able to obtain a referral for his child to be treated at Istanbul University Hospital in Turkey, sponsored by the Turkish government, and coordinated for travel via Egypt when the Rafah terminal opened. However, despite having coordination to cross on February 2, 2014 (renewed again for February 15), the family was not able to travel and the child died on March 13 at home.