



Maternity section at Shifa hospital in disrepair, November 2015© WHO

Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 10 (December 22, 2015)

Summary: October 2015

Continued decline in approvals for patients' permits

- **Erez crossing:** 2,275 patient applications were submitted for permits to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in October. According to the Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza, only 69.85% of patients were approved, 11.21% were denied permits (255 patients, including 7 children and 15 elderly patient over 60 years old) and 18.94% received no response to their applications (431 patients, including 133 children). Approval rates have dropped since May; the cause of decline is not clear. 10 (8 males; 2 females) patients were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit. 93.93% of permit applications were from referral patients financed by the MoH, 4% by NGOs and other donors, and 2% self-funded.

Rafah: No exit during October

- **Rafah border:** Rafah terminal was closed for exit to Egypt during October but was open for residents to return to Gaza on 3 days during October allowing 4,198 stranded pilgrims and travellers, including patients, to return to Gaza. No medical aid and no medical delegations were allowed to enter Gaza during the month. The border was open on only 24 days so far in 2015, allowing only 148 patients to cross into Egypt for health care. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah monthly for health-related access.

MoH referrals in October

- **Ministry of Health referred 1,979 Gaza patients* in October for outside care.** According to the Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD), the main referral treatments needed were in oncology, hematology, nuclear medicine, ophthalmology and orthopaedic surgery specialties. Drug shortages drive many referrals; 35% of essential medicines and 41% of medical disposables were at zero stock at end of October in Gaza Ministry warehouses.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for October:** NIS 9,387,550.

*Note: Beginning with this report, referral data used in the WHO monthly reports will reflect the financial decision-based data for Gaza patients received from the MoH central referral office in Ramallah. This data includes renewals for expired referrals to Egypt for Gaza patients waiting for access, 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 has been adjusted in the tables below so that trends can be evaluated. WHO's annual reports already reflect published data from the MoH in

REFERRALS

Referrals of Gaza patients

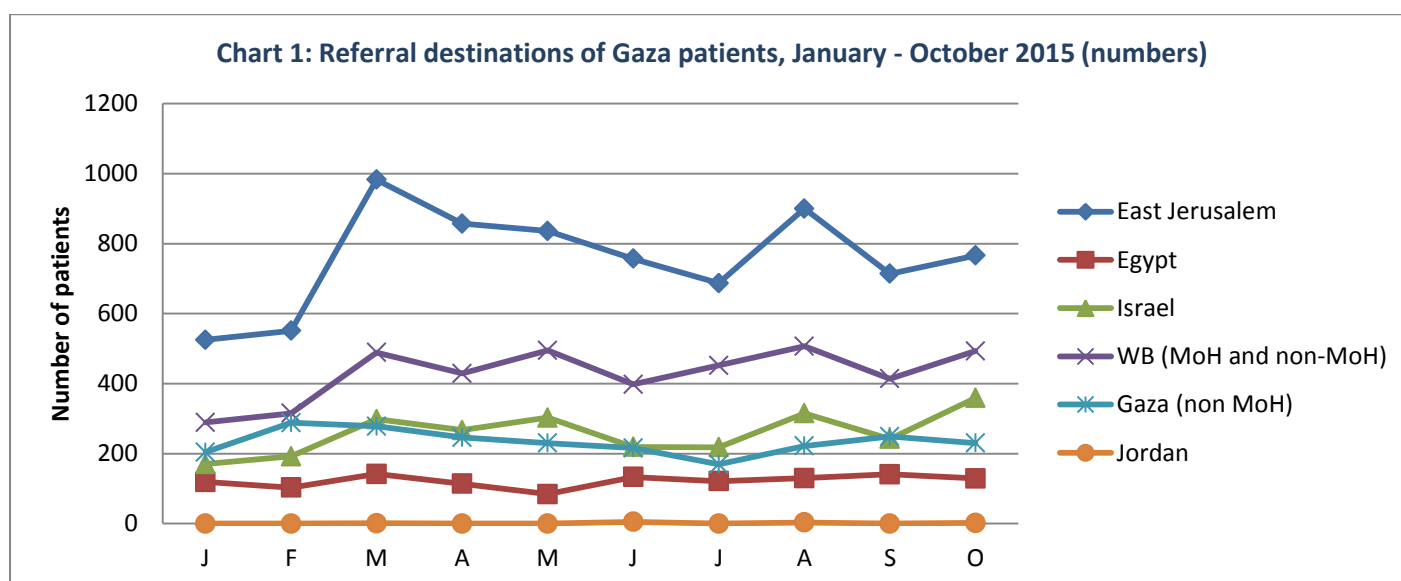
The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,979 referrals for Gaza patients in October, according to the Referral Abroad Department (RAD) data in Ramallah (**Table 1**). October totals were similar to the monthly average in 2015. Referrals to Israeli hospitals and to West Bank hospitals were higher than the average for the year, while referrals to Egypt, East Jerusalem, Jordan, and within Gaza lower than the year's average (**Table 1 and Chart 1**).

The 230 referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza were mainly for MRI (93), heart catheterization (52), urology (28), rehabilitation (16), pediatrics (12) and the remaining (29) were for 15 different specialties.

Table 1: Palestinian MoH referrals by destination, January to October 2015

Referral Destination	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	TOTAL
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	208	292	288	246	236	248	168	221	253	230	2,390
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	348	368	537	462	554	445	487	571	555	493	4,820
East Jerusalem	595	616	1,075	934	893	793	737	945	778	766	8,132
Jordan	0	1	4	4	2	5	3	9	4	2	34
Israel	198	214	329	320	366	301	321	382	299	359	3,089
Egypt	132	106	174	148	104	159	141	182	161	129	1,436
Total	1,481	1,597	2,407	2,114	2,155	1,951	1,857	2,310	2,050	1,979	19,901

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Ramallah, December 17, 2015 [See Note, p.1]



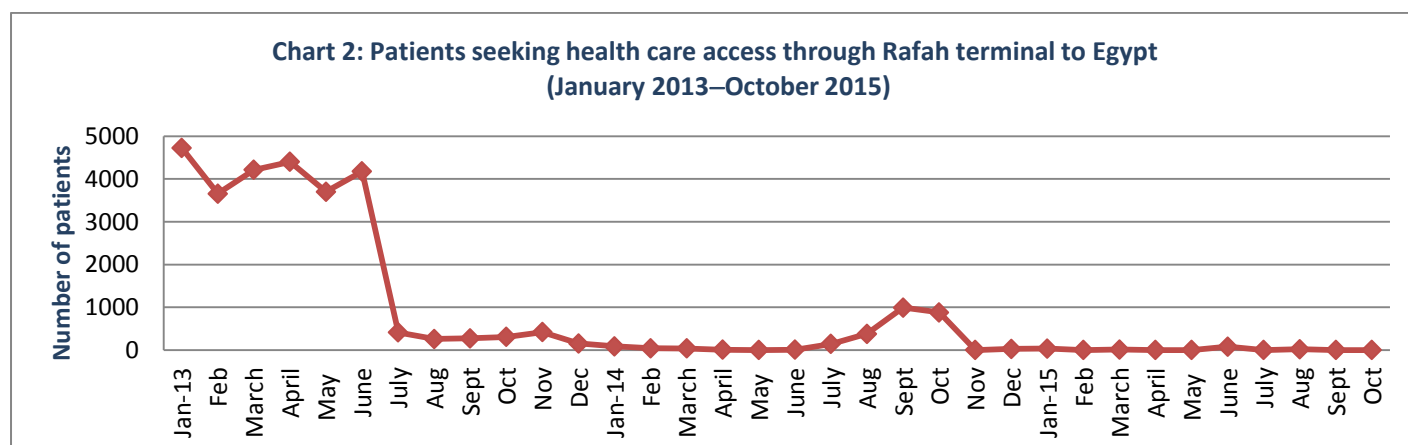
Of the 1,979 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in October, 1620 (81.86%) depended on access approvals from Israel to exit from Erez checkpoint and 121 (6.52%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and required the Rafah border to be accessible).

The RAD in Ramallah reported an estimated cost of **NIS 9,387,550** for the 1,979 referrals for Gaza patients in October.

Access through Rafah terminal

No exit to Egypt during October: According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the terminal was closed completely for exit and was open on 3 days only for returning residents; 4,198 persons returned during the period (2,395 pilgrims and 1,802 Gaza residents waiting in Egypt, including patients).

Only humanitarian cases have been permitted to travel, including patients, university students studying abroad and individuals holding legal residency in other countries. However, in October no patients or other humanitarian cases were allowed to cross, nor were any medical delegations or medical aid permitted to enter Gaza through Rafah during the month.



Rafah terminal has been closed by the Egyptian authorities since July 2013 except for the exit of a very limited number of humanitarian cases on very few days (**Chart 2**). Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah monthly for health-related access. The border has been opened a total of only 24 days so far this year, allowing only 148 of 1,428 Gaza patients referred by the MoH to cross into Egypt for health care.

Access through Erez

In October, the total number of patients' applications for Israeli permits to cross Erez was 2,275. This represents the highest monthly total since the blockade on Gaza was imposed in 2007 and continues a trend in 2015 of continuous high demand on access to health care through Erez, especially in the past 3 years (**Chart 3**) of blocked access to private medical care in Egypt. Out of the 2,275 permit applications, 1,074 (47.16%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, 668 (29.36%) to the West Bank, 521 (22.9%) to Israel, and 12 (0.53%) to Jordan.

The process of applying for a permit is lengthy and complex and sometimes requires multiple attempts. It requires the patient to have a valid financial commitment from the Palestinian MoH and documentation of an appointment from the receiving hospital. If the MoH financial commitment validity or the hospital appointment expire before a patient receives a permit, the application process must be repeated and health care is delayed. October data showed that out of the 2,275 applications submitted in the Palestinian coordination office, 23.4% were multiple attempts: 237 applied twice, 18 patients applied 3 times, and one patient applied 4 times.

In October, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported that 1,589 (69.85%) patients' permits applications were approved (**Table 2**), the lowest approval rate since September 2009. 255 applicants (11.21%) were denied access, the highest denial rate since June 2010. 431 (18.94%) did not receive an answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care. According to the Palestinian Coordination office head, some delays may be due to a change in the Israeli officer in charge of patient permits and the work team of soldiers who may not be familiar with the coordination system.

Patients should submit their applications to the district liaison office 7-10 days prior to the appointment date but in October 648 applications (28.48%) out of the total 2,275 were submitted in less than 7 days, most frequently because of timing of the appointment given by the referral hospital. 618 (27.16%) waited 15-30 days, and 50 (2.2%) waited more than 30 days to receive a response from the Israeli district liaison office on their applications.

Chart 3: Total number of patient permit applications to cross Erez, January 2013-Oct 2015

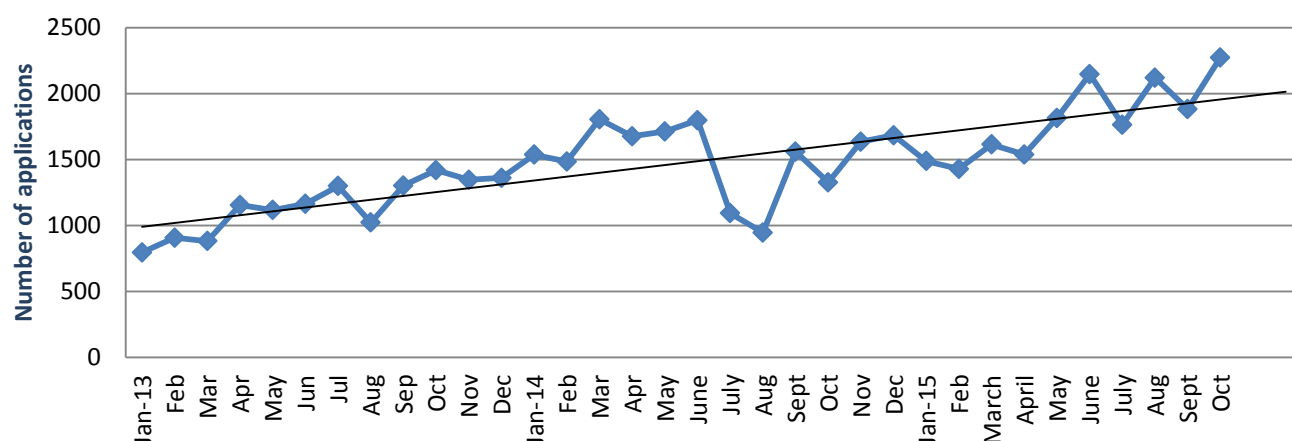


Table 2: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS interviews, October 2015

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	93	114	71	93	1	1	21	20	0	0
4 - 17	191	263	151	206	3	2	37	55	0	0
18- 40	307	354	171	143	55	100	81	111	1	6
41 - 60	297	319	239	230	38	40	20	49	1	2
Over 60	173	164	159	126	4	11	10	27	0	0
Sub-total	1,061	1,214	791	798	101	154	169	262	2	8
Total	2,275		1,589 (69.85%)		255 (11.21%)		431 (18.94%)		10 (0.44%)	

* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH –Gaza

The total applications in October 2015 were 71% higher than the corresponding month in 2014 with an approval rate 8.4% lower; the percentage of denials was 5.5% higher than in October 2014. Comparing the period from January to October 2015 to similar period in 2014, the number of applications was 21% higher, approval rate was 3.7% lower and denial rate was double in 2015 (**Table 3**).

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

Period	October 2014		October 2015		January-October 2014		January-October 2015	
Total	1,327 (F:631; M:696)		2,275 (F:1,061; M:1,214)		14,946 (F:6,817; M:8,129)		18,077 (F:8,425; M:9,652)	
Approved	1,038 (F:527; M:511)	78.22%	1,589 (F:791; M:798)	69.85%	12,250 (F:5,879; M:6,371)	81.96%	14,143 (F:6,983; M:7,160)	78.24%
Denied	76 (F:27; M:49)	5.73%	255 (F:101; M:154)	11.21%	428 (F:137; M:291)	2.86%	1,035 (F:323; M:712)	5.72%
Delayed	213 (F:77; M:136)	16.05%	431 (F:169; M:262)	18.94%	2,268 (F:801; M:1,467)	15.18%	2,899 (F:1,119; M:1,780)	16.04%
-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	15 (F:1; M:14)	1.13%	10 (F:2; M:8)	0.44%	142 (F:19; M:123)	0.95%	146 (F:34; M:112)	0.81%

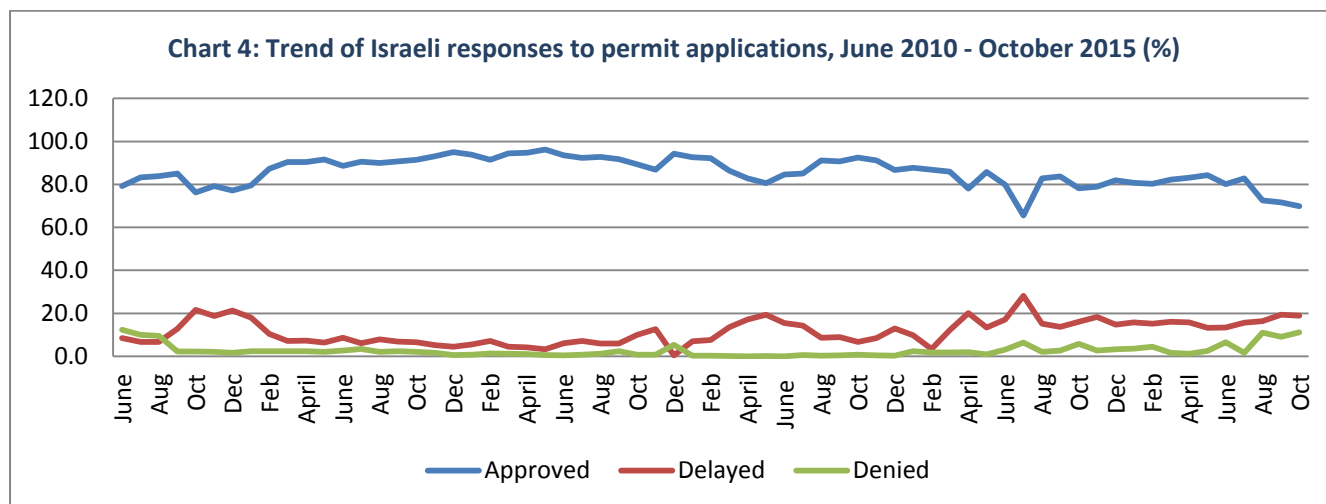
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Patient companions: In October, 2,316 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. Only 64.85% were approved, 25.13% were pending and 10.02% were denied. Only one first-degree relative is permitted and permits are subject to age restrictions and security clearance. Blocking parents of children effectively delays medical care to children who must be accompanied.

Financial coverage: 93.93% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in October were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.07% were self-funded, 1.63% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1.45% by Peres Center for Peace,

0.53% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.26% by the Military Medical Services, 0.09% by other organizations and 0.04% by the Doctors Without Borders.

Charts 4 Shows that from August 2015 the Israeli approval rate for patients' permit applications has been declining and denials and delays have been increasing. Denial rate is the highest since June 2010. The cause of this recent decline in access is not clear.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Denied care: 255 patients (154 males; 101 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 7 children and 15 patients over 60 years old. Of the denied patients, 224 patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 29 in Israel and 2 in Jordan. 233 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, and 15 were self-funded, 3 by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 2 by Peres Center for Peace, 1 by MMS, and 1 by another organization. Of those denied: 12.94% (33 patients) had submitted their applications less than 8 days before the hospital appointment; 47.84% (122) had waited for a response for 8-14 days; 35.29% (90) waited 15-30 days; and 10 patients waited more than 30 days. The denied patients had appointments for orthopedics (80), neurosurgery (45), ophthalmology (32), internal medicine (20), general surgery (18), urology (11) and 19 other specialties (49).

Delayed care: 431 patient applicants (262 males; 169 females), including 133 children and 37 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 431 patients delayed, 80.97% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 18.56% in Israel, and 0.46% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in oncology (65), ophthalmology (59), neurosurgery (42), pediatrics (41), orthopedics (30), cardiology (29), hematology (29), nuclear medicine (20), and the rest (166) were for 20 other specialties.

Out of 431 delayed patient applicants, 25.06% had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date. However, 43.16% waited 8-14 days, 29.23% waited 15-30 days and 2.55% waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request. 47 patients out of the delayed were eventually approved late, within the first 2 weeks of November.

Security Interviews: 10 patients (8 males; 2 females) aged 18-60 were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS).

Patients and companions crossed Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,451 patients (and 1,381 companions) crossed Erez in October to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals; 67 patients were transferred by ambulance (back-to-back) with 67 companions. Erez crossing was open for 25 days with regular day-time working hours and closed for 6 days (5 Saturdays + 1 Jewish holiday) during the month.