



In March, the Palestinian Ministry of Health referred a record 2,191 patients from Gaza to access health care in East Jerusalem hospitals and other locations. 87% required Israeli or Egyptian approvals for access. Referrals are becoming more necessary due to shortages of medicines and low capacity at MoH facilities. © WHO.



Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD 3 (May 5, 2015)

Summary: March 2015

Access restrictions tighten

- **Rafah border:** The Rafah border with Egypt has been opened for 5 days only this year (January: 3 days; March: 2 days). 14 patients travelled to Egypt for medical treatment in March and a shipment of medical aid and 2 ambulances were allowed to enter Gaza.
- **Access through Erez:** 1,615 patients applied for permits to cross Erez checkpoint: 82.29% of patients were approved, 16.04% received no response to their applications (259 patients, including 80 children) and 1.67% were denied permits (27 patients, including 2 children and 4 elderly) were denied permits.
- **Interrogations:** 17 patients (3 females and 14 males) were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit and 2 were later approved.

MoH referrals increase significantly

- **March was the highest number of referrals in one month since WHO began monitoring access to health care:** According to the Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza, 2,191 referrals were issued in March to non-MoH health facilities for specialized treatment, 45% more than the monthly average in 2014.
- **Gender gap:** The gender gap in referrals remained wide: 58.47% male patients versus 41.53% female patients. 27% of all referrals were for children aged 0-17 years and 18.07% were for patients aged over 60 years.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for March:** NIS 10,968,467.

REFERRALS

Referrals of Gaza patients

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 2,191 referrals for Gaza patients in March, according to the Referral Abroad Department (RAD) data in Gaza,¹ 45% higher than the monthly average of 2014. While referral numbers usually increase seasonally and fluctuate during the year, March rates were the highest recorded by WHO since 2009 (**Table 1; Chart 1**). An accumulation of patients who deferred or were delayed travel in the post-conflict period may explain the increase; referrals have been lower than usual in the previous eight months.

In particular, referrals to East Jerusalem and to West Bank hospitals increased sharply, 86% and 89% respectively, compared to the monthly averages in 2014. Referrals to Egypt also increased in spite of prevailing difficulties with access.

Referrals to Israeli medical facilities and referrals to non-MoH facilities in Gaza remained near to the monthly average in 2014. (**Chart 2**).

Table 1: Palestinian MoH Referrals, by destination, January-March 2015 compared to 2014 monthly average

Referral Destination	2014 (monthly average)	January 2015	February 2015	March 2015	Q1 TOTAL
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	267	204	288	278	770
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	259	289	315	489	1,093
East Jerusalem	529	525	551	983	2,059
Jordan	1	0	0	1	1
Israel	286	170	192	298	660
Egypt	169	119	103	142	364
Total	1,511	1,307	1,449	2,191	4,947

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza

Chart 1: 13 month trend of total MoH monthly referral issued to Gaza patients, March 2014-March 2015

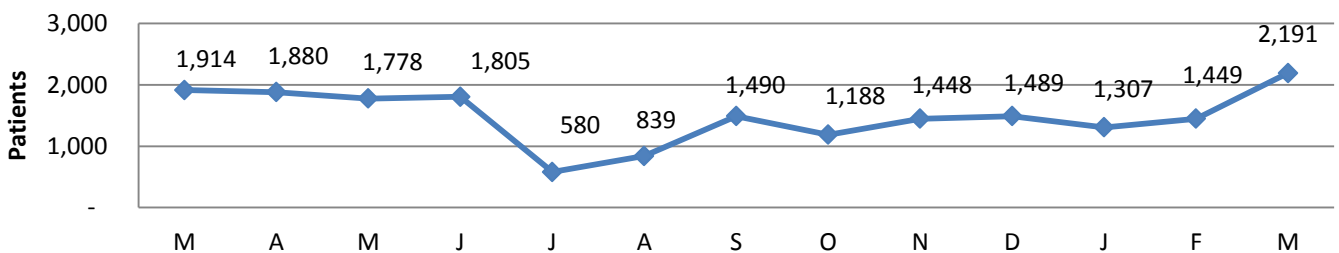
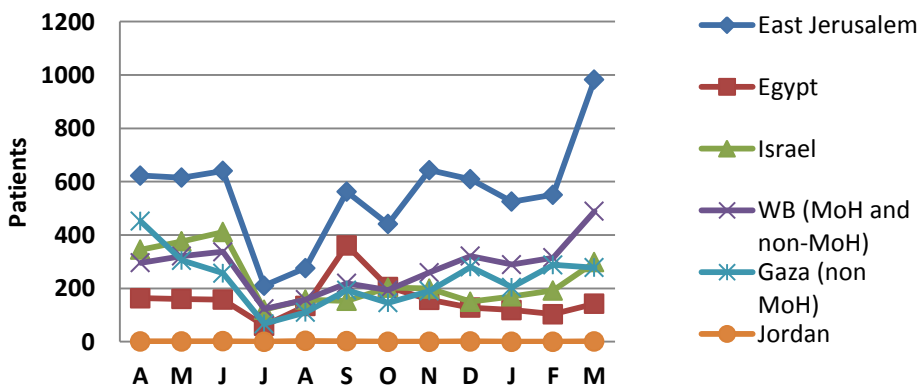


Chart 2: Trend of last 12 months of referrals of Gaza patients, April 2014-March 2015 (numbers)



Referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza were 278 in number and they were mainly for MRI (127), heart catheterization (71), urology (22), rehabilitation (22), and the rest were 36 referrals for 12 different specialties.

In March the processing time for arranging patients' hospital appointments and for financial approvals of referrals by the central Service Purchasing Department (SPD)

in Ramallah improved compared to recent months. The improvement is attributed in part to WHO's provision of a web-based approval tracking system which facilitates communications between the referral department in Gaza and the central SPD in Ramallah. The online system became fully operational in early March. However, hospital

¹ The MoH Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza data reflects the number of patient applications approved for financial coverage by the Service Purchasing Department (SPD) in Ramallah.

appointment management is still difficult due to lack of available beds. “Patients must wait sometimes more than three months for appointments,” a Gaza RAD employee said.

The estimated cost for March referrals based on the central SPD data² in Ramallah was NIS 10,968,467.

Of the 2,191 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in March, 1,913 (87.3%) were to health facilities outside Gaza: 1771 patients (81%) required permits from Israeli authorities to exit through Erez crossing and 142 (6.48%) required approvals from Egypt to exit through Rafah.

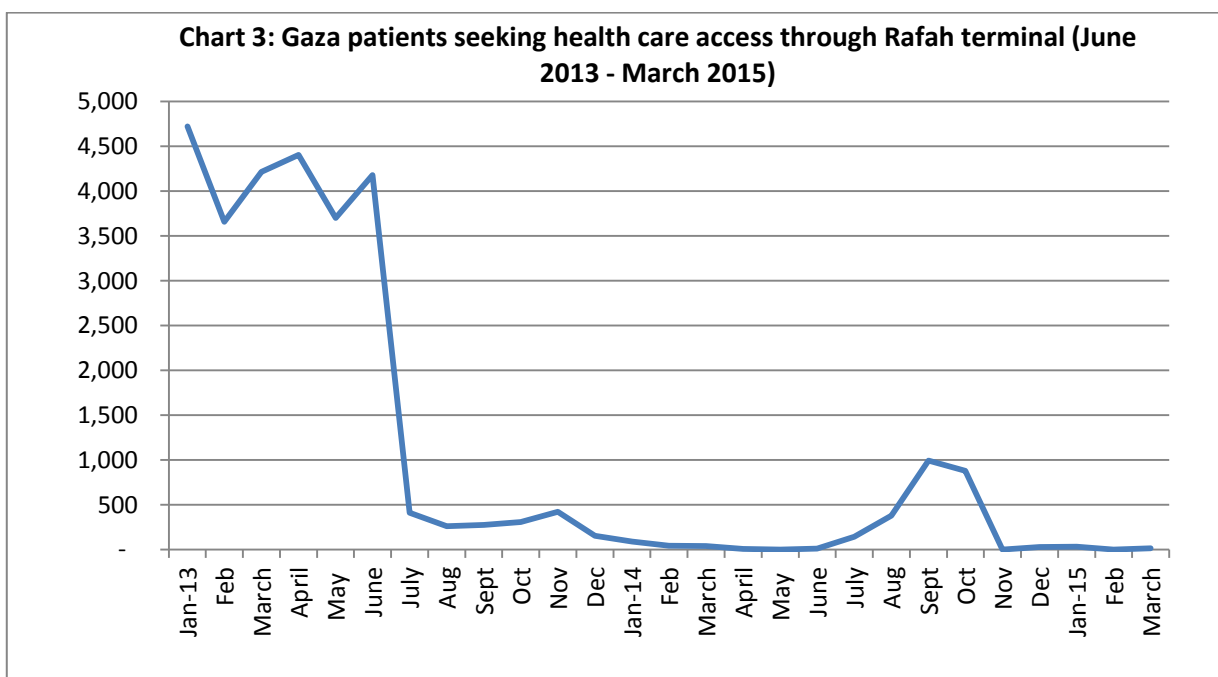
27.11% of all patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 18.07% were elderly patients over 60. Female referral patients were 41.53% of the total, compared to 58.47% male patients. 91.88% of referrals in March were for hospital admissions and 8.12% for outpatient clinics.

Medical reasons for referrals: The top ten specialties requiring referrals for treatment were: oncology—365 referrals (16.66%), orthopaedic surgery —175 (7.99%), ophthalmology—171 (7.8%), nuclear medicine—169 (7.71%), paediatrics—148 (6.75%), MRI —143 (6.53%), neurosurgery—120 (5.48%), haematology—110 (5.02%), heart catheterization—94 (4.29%), urology—91 (4.15%), and the remaining 605 (27.6%) referrals were to 29 other specialities.

Access through Rafah terminal

Limited access to Egypt in March: According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the terminal was closed by the Egyptian authorities in both directions on all but two days, March 9 and 10, when 1,010 travellers were allowed to leave Gaza and 1,440 to return. Among the travellers leaving Gaza were 14 patients. On March 5, the terminal was opened exceptionally to allow the return of the bodies of 3 Gaza patients. Two had died in hospital in late February in Egypt but coordination for their return earlier had been unsuccessful. The third patient died in March. According to Palestinian authorities at the terminal, Egypt allowed a 90-ton shipment of medical aid to enter Gaza in March, donated to the Paletinian MoH by the Emarati Red Crescent, and two ambulances donated by Egypt.

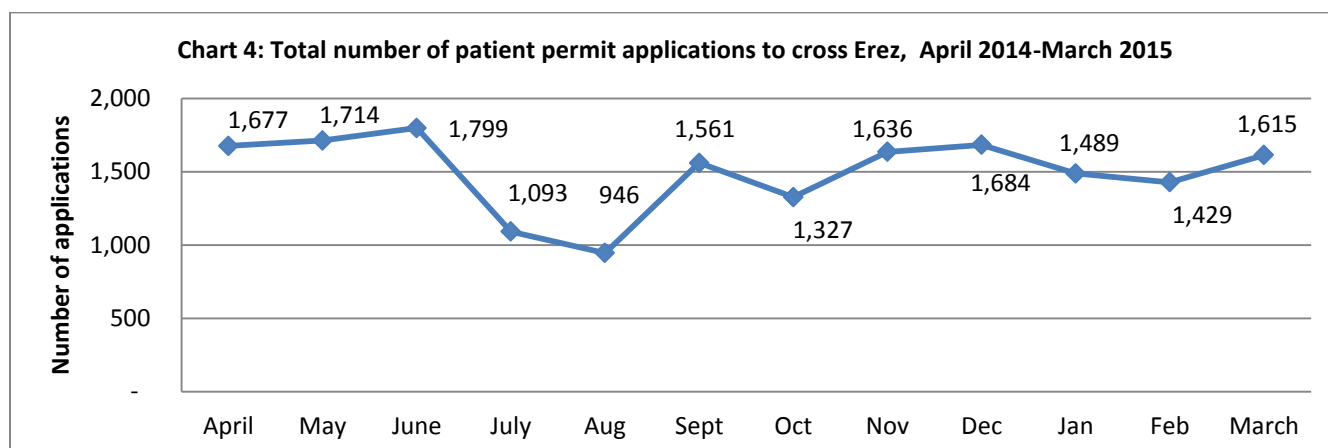
Rafah terminal has been closed by the Egyptian authorities since July 2013 except for the exit of a small number of humanitarian cases on two or three days monthly (Chart 3). Humanitarian cases include patients, foreign passport holders, students or Palestinians with legal residency in a third country. From January to March 2015, the terminal was opened on only 5 days.



² The central SPD in Ramallah tabulates the total number of financial approval decisions for patients on one referral, which may include additional procedures or hospital readmissions for the same patient. SPD data for March indicates 216 additional referrals for Gaza in March. For monthly comparisons, WHO uses the data from the MoH RAD in Gaza.

Access through Erez

In March, the total number of patients' applications for Israeli permits to cross Erez was 1,615, 13% higher than the previous month and 6% higher than 2014 monthly average of 1,522 applications (**Chart 4**). Out of the 1,615 permit applications, 810 (50.15%) were for patients destined to East Jerusalem, 405 (25.08%) to West Bank, 377 (23.34%) to Israel, and 23 (1.42%) to Jordan.



In March, 1,329 (82.29%) of patients' permit applications were approved (**Table 2**). 27 applicants (1.67%) were denied access. 259 (16.04%) did not receive a positive answer for their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

There were fewer permit applications for the period January to March 2015 and patients were less likely to be approved, than for the same period in 2014. However, patients were less likely to be requested to attend a security interview (**Table 3**).

Table 2: Israeli responses to permit requests 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	57	105	44	84	0	1	13	20	0	0
4 - 17	113	168	90	143	1	0	22	25	0	0
18- 40	205	280	157	192	3	13	45	74	3	10
41 - 60	216	213	208	178	1	4	7	31	0	4
Over 60	122	137	114	119	0	4	8	14	0	0
Sub-total	713	902	613	716	5	22	95	164	3	14
Total	1,615		1,329 (82.29%)		27 (1.67%)		259 (16.04%)		17 (1.05%)	

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

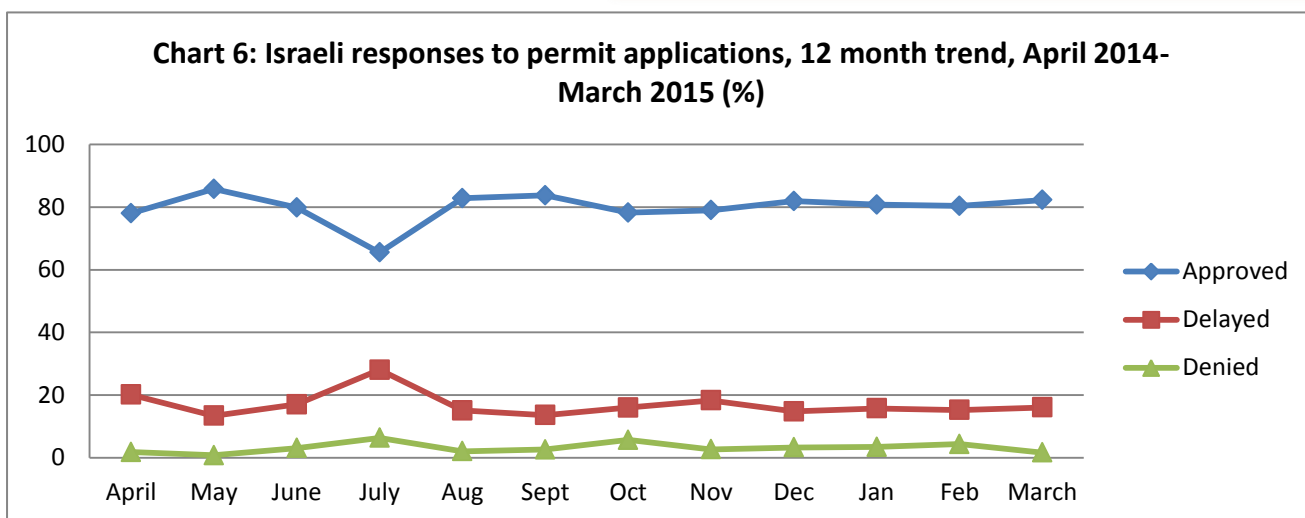
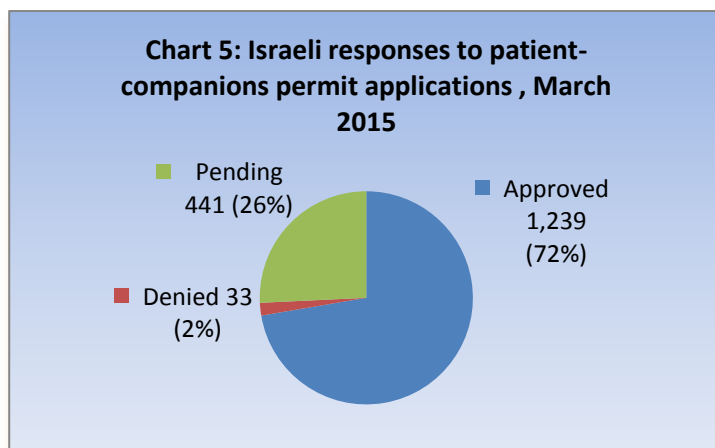
Table 3: Decisions by Israeli District Liaison Office on permit requests to cross Erez by response, sex of applicant (number and %) in 2015 compared to corresponding periods in 2014

Period	March 2014		March 2015		Jan-March 2014		January – March 2015	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Total	1806 (F:821; M:985)		1,615 (F:713; M:903)		4,829 (F:2236; M:2593)		4,533 (F:2,065;M:2,468)	
Approved	1553 (F:740; M:813)	85.99%	1,329 (F:613; M:716)	82.29%	4,192 (F:2039; M:2153)	87.3%	3,679 (F:1,773;M:1,906)	81.16%
Denied	33 (F:12; M:21)	1.83%	27 (F:5; M:22)	1.67%	120 (F:38; M:82)	2.88%	142 (F:25;M:117)	3.13%
Delayed	220 (F:69; M:151)	12.18%	259 (F:95; M:164)	16.04%	517 (F:159 M:358)	9.82%	712 (F:267;M:445)	15.71%
<i>-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)</i>	18 (F:2;M:16)	1%	17 (F3; M:14)	1.05%	64 (F:8; M:56)	1.33%	49 (F:15;M:34)	1.08%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

In March, 1,713 applications for patient companions were submitted to the Israeli authorities. 72% of them were approved, 26% were pending and 2% were denied (Chart 5). Chart 6 shows a declining 12-month trend in Israeli approvals of patients' permit applications.

Financial coverage: 91.52% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in March were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.79% were self-funded, 2.04% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1.73% by the Peres Center for Peace, 1.3% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, and the rest 0.61% were funded by UNRWA, insurance company, Hadassa fund, medical military services, and other organizations.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Denied care: 27 patients (5 females; 22 males) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 2 children and 4 persons over 60 years. 20 of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 6 in Israel and 1 in Jordan. Of the denied patients, 22 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 2 self-funded, 2 by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, and 1 by Noor Al-Alam Foundation. 14 patients had waited for a response for 1-7 days, 8 waited 8-14 days, 4 waited 15-30 days and 1 waited more than 30 days before receiving a denial. Of those denied, 7 patients had appointments for ophthalmology, 4 for orthopedics, 3 for cardiology, 3 for neurosurgery, 2 for maxillofacial surgery, 2 for hematology, 1 for internal medicine, 1 for nuclear medicine, 1 for ob/gyn, 1 for plastic surgery, 1 for urology and 1 for oncology.

Delayed care: 259 patient applicants (164 males; 95 females), including 80 children and 22 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 259 patients delayed, 78% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 21% in Israel, and 1% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in cardiology (36), ophthalmology (35), oncology (32), orthopedics (30), pediatrics (22), nuclear medicine (14), neurosurgery (14), general surgery (13), hemaotology (12), and the rest were 51 for 14 different specialties. Non-urgent patient applications for a permit to cross Erez should be submitted to the district liason office 7-10 days prior to appointment date.

Security Interviews: 17 patients (14 males; 3 female), 13 aged 18-40, and 4 aged 41-60 years were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) and 2 were approved after the interview.

Patients and companions crossed Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,201 patients (and 1,135 companions) crossed Erez in March to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals, including 81 transferred by ambulance (back-to-back). Erez crossing was open for 27 days with regular day-time working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays) during the month.