



Ministry of Health Nasser Hospital, Khan Younis, Gaza/WHO.

## Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD 6 (July 27, 2015)

### Summary: June 2015

#### More patients need access through Erez exit; Rafah opens for 10 days in June

- **Access:** 2,148 patients applied for permits to cross Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in June, the highest number of patient requests recorded for a single month since WHO began monitoring permit requests. The permit approval rate dropped and denied requests increased compared to the previous 3 months. According to the Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza, 80.07% of patients were approved, 13.41% received no response to their applications (288 patients, including 79 children) and 6.52% were denied permits (140 patients, including 9 children). 10 patients, all males, were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit. One patient was later approved a permit.

The Israeli COGAT health coordination office responded to WHO regarding the 140 denied in June: permit requests of 21 patients were denied on the grounds that patients were deemed 'unlikely to return to Gaza', or 'their medical condition could be treated locally'; 3 patients with expired visitor permits and without Israeli-issued IDs were granted permits; and 126 requests were received less than 7 days prior to their hospital appointment, leaving insufficient processing time for permits.

- **Rafah border:** Rafah terminal was partially opened on 10 days and closed on the remaining days in June. 80 patients were transferred by ambulances towards Egypt with 95 companions. The border has been opened a total of only 15 days so far this year, allowing a total of only 127 patients to cross into Egypt for health care, less than 5% of the pre-July 2013 closure monthly numbers.

#### MoH referrals in June

- **Ministry of Health referrals of Gaza patients in June less than the average for the first 5 months of 2015:** According to the Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza, 1,723 referrals were issued in June for specialized treatment unavailable in Gaza MoH health facilities. Oncology, orthopaedic surgery, ophthalmology, nuclear medicine, and paediatrics were the top 5 specialties needed in June.
- **Gender gap:** The gender gap in Gaza referrals remained very wide: 58.44% male patients versus 41.56% female patients. 29.37% of all referrals were for children aged 0-17 years and 17.6% were for patients aged over 60 years.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for June:** NIS 7,970,028.

## REFERRALS

### Referrals of Gaza patients

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,723 referrals for Gaza patients in June, according to the Referral Abroad Department (RAD) data in Gaza,<sup>1</sup> slightly less than the average of the first 5 months this year (1762). (Table 1, Chart 1). The Ministry of Health issued a total of 10,531 referrals to Gaza patients in the first half of 2015, 5% lower than in the corresponding period of 2014.

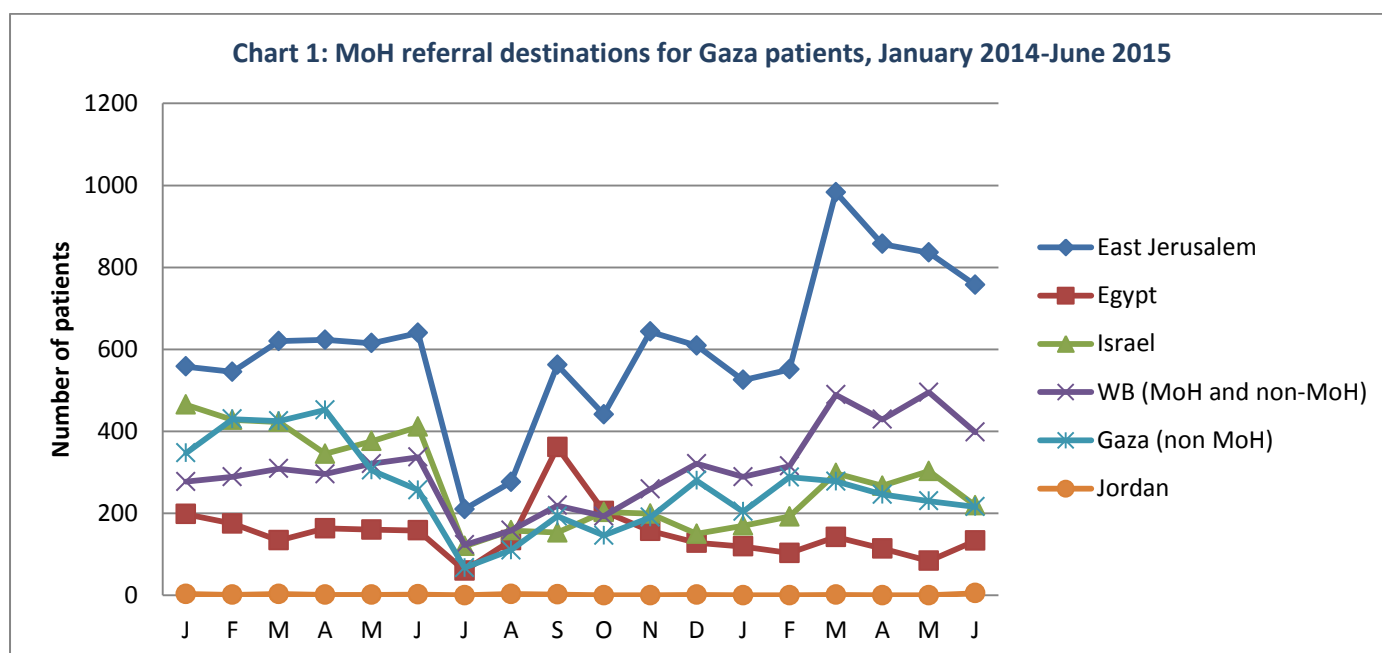
**Table 1: Palestinian MoH referrals, by destination, January-June 2015**

Referral Destination	January 2015	February 2015	March 2015	April 2015	May 2015	June 2015	TOTAL
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	204	288	278	246	230	216	1,462
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	289	315	489	429	495	398	2,415
East Jerusalem	525	551	983	857	836	757	4,509
Jordan	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Israel	170	192	298	267	303	219	1,449
Egypt	119	103	142	114	84	133	695
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,307</b>	<b>1,449</b>	<b>2,191</b>	<b>1,913</b>	<b>1,948</b>	<b>1723</b>	<b>10,531</b>

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza

Referrals to all destinations decreased compared to the preceding 3 months except to Egypt, which increased slightly to 133. The 216 referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza were mainly for MRI (92), heart catheterization (71), rehabilitation (16), pediatrics (10), cardiology (6), ICU (5) and 10 other specialties (16).

**Chart 1: MoH referral destinations for Gaza patients, January 2014-June 2015**

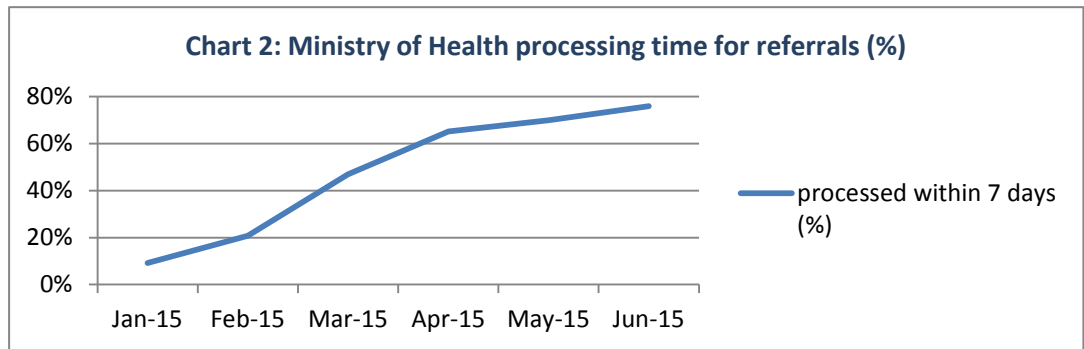


Of the 1,723 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in June, 1,507 (87.5%) were to health facilities outside Gaza: 1,374 patients (79.7%) required permits from Israeli authorities to exit through Erez crossing and 133 (7.7%) required approvals from Egypt to exit through Rafah.

29.37% of all patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 17.6% were patients over 60. Female referral patients were 41.56% of the total, compared to 58.44% male patients. 91.4% of referrals in June were for hospital admissions and 8.6% for outpatient clinics.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

The first half of the year 2015 showed significant improvement in the Ministry of Health's processing time for patients' applications for referral, both by the local office in Gaza and the central Service Purchasing Department (SPD) in Ramallah



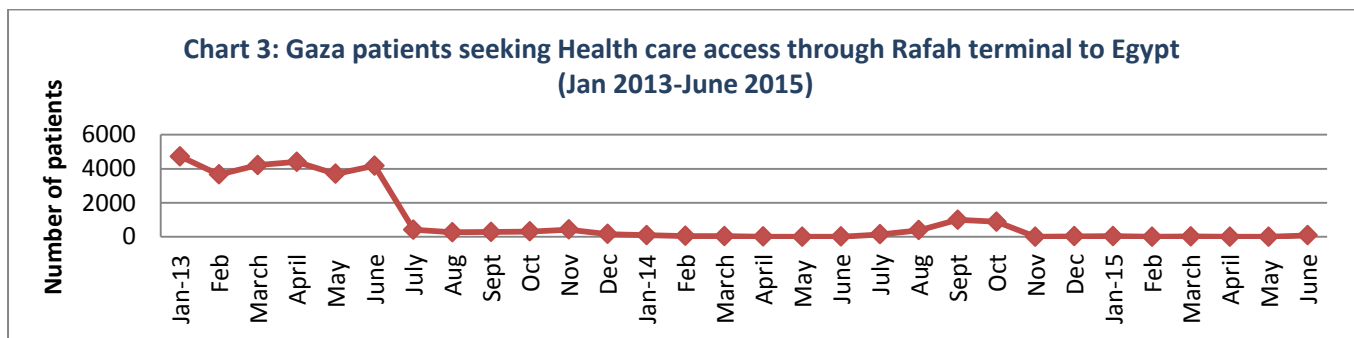
(Chart 2). WHO supported this facilitation by providing a web-based approval tracking system to shorten communication time between the Gaza and Ramallah offices. However, management of hospital appointments remains slow due to the high occupancy rates in the receiving hospitals.

**Medical reasons for referrals:** The top ten specialties requiring referrals in June for treatment were: oncology—285 referrals (16.54%), orthopaedic surgery —151 (8.76%), ophthalmology—124 (7.2%), nuclear medicine—114 (6.62%), pediatrics—109 (6.33%), heart catheterization—108 (6.27%), MRI —102 (5.92%), hematology—96 (5.57%), neurosurgery—86 (4.99%), heart surgery—64 (3.71%); the remaining 484 (28.09%) referrals were to 21 other specialities. The estimated cost for June referrals based on the central SPD data<sup>2</sup> in Ramallah was **NIS 7,970,028**.

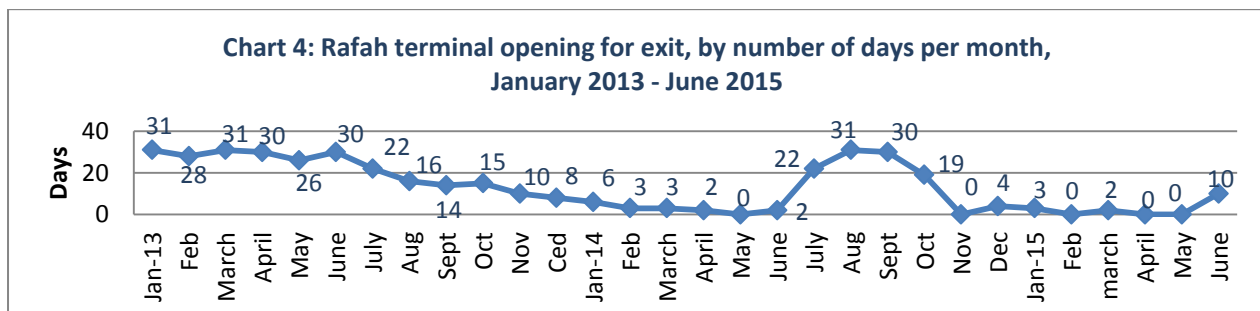
### Access through Rafah terminal

**Limited access to Egypt in June:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the terminal was partially open both directions in 10 days and it was completely closed for 20 days. The total number of travellers exited towards Egypt in June was 5127 but the Egyptian authorities denied 225 (4.4%) travellers. The Palestinian terminal registered 80 patients and 95 companions who were transferred by ambulances.

According to Palestinian authorities at the terminal, no medical aid or medical delegations entered to Gaza during the month. Rafah terminal has been closed by the Egyptian authorities since July 2013 except for the exit of a small number of humanitarian cases (Chart 3).



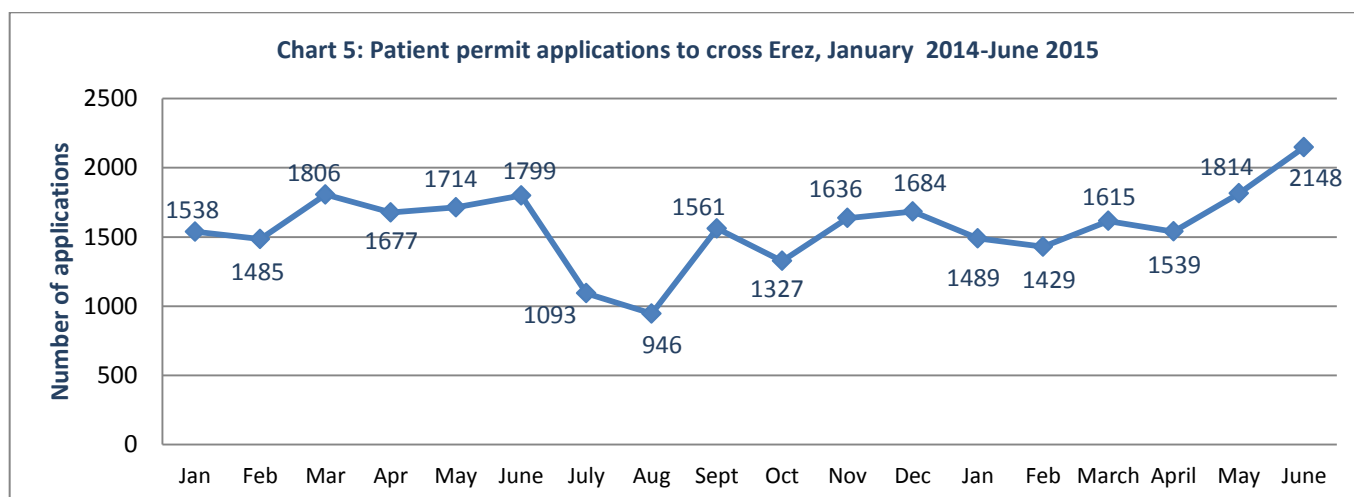
In the first half of 2015, 695 patients were referred by the Ministry of Health to Egypt but only 127 were able to travel on the 15 days that the border was open (Chart 4).



<sup>2</sup> Referral totals differ between Gaza and the Ramallah central RAD office (called now the Services Purchasing Department). Gaza tabulates the number of patients referred while Ramallah tallies 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 June indicates 228 additional referrals for Gaza. For monthly comparisons, WHO uses the data from the MoH RAD in Gaza.

## Access through Erez

In June, the total number of patients' applications for Israeli permits to cross Erez was 2,148, the highest number of applications ever submitted in one month since 2006 (**Chart 5**). The high demand for referrals reflects shortages and lack of specialized services available in the health sector in Gaza and the limited access to medical care in Egypt. Out of the 2,148 permit applications, 1,022 (47.58%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, 633 to the West Bank, 469 (21.83%) to Israel, and 24 (1.12%) to Jordan. The four top hospitals were Makassed (25%) and Augusta Victoria (14%) in East Jerusalem, Najah hospital in Nablus West Bank (10%), and Tel Hashomir in Israel (5%). The rest 46.09% were to 35 other hospitals in the West Bank and in Israel.



In June, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported 1,720 (80.07%) patients' permits applications were approved (**Table 2**). 140 applicants (6.52%) were denied access and 288 (13.41%) did not receive an answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care. The number of patients' applications was 19.4% higher in June 2015 than in June 2014, with a similar approval rate (**Table 3**).

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

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	96	135	78	117	2	2	16	16	0	0
4 - 17	172	239	139	202	3	2	30	35	0	0
18 - 40	272	324	207	190	20	59	45	75	0	10
41 - 60	270	291	248	228	7	28	15	35	0	0
Missed	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Over 60	168	180	159	152	4	13	5	15	0	0
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>979</b>	<b>1,169</b>	<b>831</b>	<b>889</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,148</b>		<b>1,720 (80.07%)</b>		<b>140 (6.52%)</b>		<b>288 (13.41%)</b>		<b>10 (0.46%)</b>	

\* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza

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

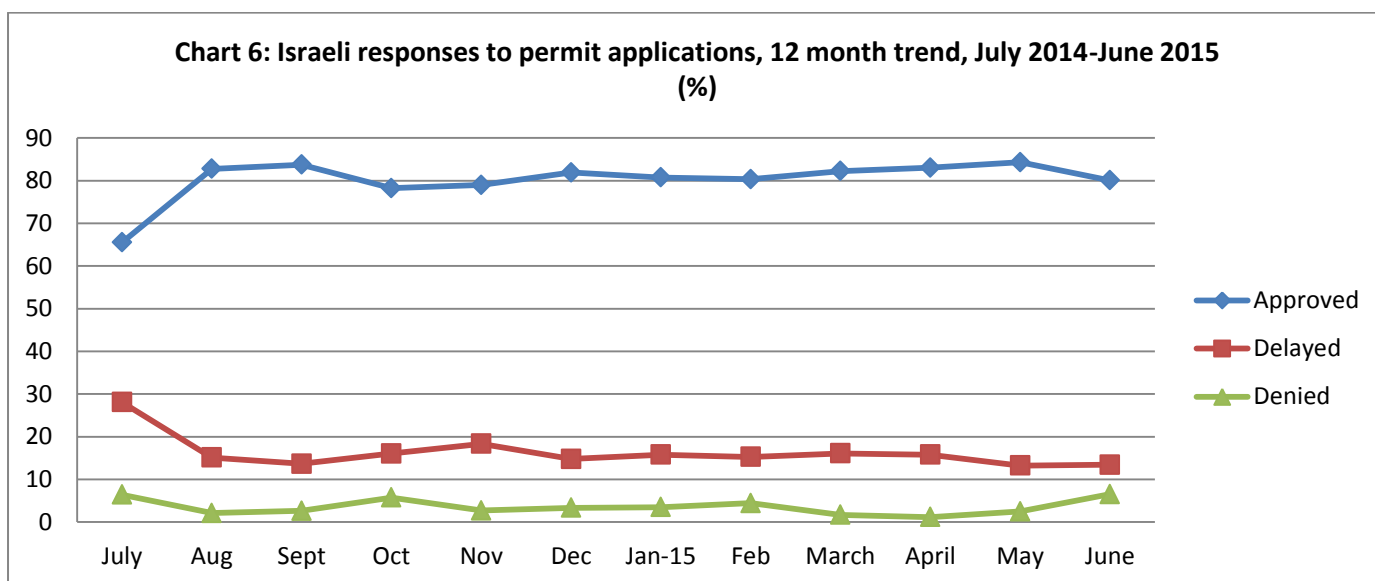
Period	June 2014		June 2015		Jan-June 2014		January – June 2015	
	Total	Approved	Total	Approved	Total	Approved	Total	Approved
Total	1799 (F:836; M:963)		2,148 (F:979; M:1,169)		10,019 (F:4,644; M:5,375)		10,034 (F:4,641; M:5,393)	
Approved	1436 (F:703; M:733)	79.82%	1,720 (F:831; M:889)	80.07%	8,406 (F:4,081; M:4,325)	83.9%	8,206 (F:3,989; M:4,217)	81.78%
Denied	56 (F:20; M:36)	3.11%	140 (F:36; M:104)	6.52%	221 (F:77; M:144)	2.21%	345 (F:73; M:272)	3.44%
Delayed	307 (F:113; M:194)	17.07%	288 (F:112; M:176)	13.41%	1,392 (F:486; M:906)	13.89%	1,483 (F:579; M:904)	14.78%
-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	10 (F:1; M:9)	0.56%	10 (F:0; M:10)	0.46%	90 (F:11; M:79)	0.90%	98 (F:24; M:74)	0.98%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Patient companions:** In June, 2,313 applications for patient companions (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. 69.69% of them were approved, 24.3% were pending and 6.01% were denied.

**Financial coverage:** 93.3% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in June were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.7% were self-funded, 2.14% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 0.70% by Peres Center for Peace, 0.65% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.19% by UNRWA, 0.14% by the MMS, 0.05% by MSF, 0.05% by Turkey and 0.09% by other organizations.

**Chart 6** shows a decline in approvals of patients' permit applications in June after a slight improvement in the previous 4 months. Denials sharply increased in June.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Denied care:** 140 patients (104 males; 36 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 9 children and 17 patients over 60 years. 131 of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, and 9 in Israel. Of the denied patients, 135 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, and 5 were self-funded. 40% (56 patients) of those denied had submitted their applications in a period less than 8 days from the hospital appointment. 45.71% (64) had waited for a response for 8-14 days, 13.57% (19) waited 15-30 days, 1 patient waited more than 30 days before receiving a denial. Of those denied, 41 patients had appointments for ophthalmology, 28 for orthopedics, 12 for neurosurgery, 10 for urology, 6 for internal medicine, 5 for cardiology, 5 for general surgery, and the remaining 33 patients had appointments in 17 other specialties.

**Delayed care:** 288 patient applicants (176 males; 112 females), including 97 children and 20 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 288 patients delayed, 75.7% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 23.61% in Israel, and 0.69% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in oncology (37), ophthalmology (37), orthopedics (31), neurosurgery (23), nuclear medicine (21), pediatrics (19), cardiology (16), hematology (16), general surgery (12), ENT (9), neurology (9), urology (8), internal medicine (9), laboratory analysis (6), ob/gyn (6), endocrinology (5), nephrology (4), chest disease (4), pediatric surgery (3), heart surgery (3), heart catheterization (2), infertility (2), ICU (2), and 1 each in thoracic surgery, dermatology, vascular surgery and pediatric surgery.

Non-emergency patient applications for a permit to cross Erez should be submitted to the district liaison office 7-10 days prior to appointment date. Out of 288 delayed patient applicants, 33% had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date, but 46.18% waited 8-14 days, 20.49% waited 15-30 days and 0.35% waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request. 28 patients out of the delayed were approved within the first 2 weeks of July.

**Security Interviews:** 10 male patients aged 18-40 were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). 1 was approved after the interview.

**Patients and companions crossed Erez:** The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,586 patients (and 1,555 companions) crossed Erez in June to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals, including 61 transferred by ambulance (back-to-back). Erez crossing was open for 26 days with regular day-time working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays) during the month.

#### **Israeli data on Gaza health access**

The data from the Israeli Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) office for Gaza health access is based on permit application dates while the Palestinian District Coordination office data is based on hospital appointment dates, and so cannot be easily compared. After reviewing the list of 140 patients denied in June, COGAT responded to WHO that: permit requests of 21 patients were denied on the grounds that patients were deemed 'unlikely to return to Gaza', or 'their medical condition could be treated locally'; 3 patients with expired visitor permits and without Israeli-issued IDs were granted permits; and 126 requests were received less than 7 days prior to their hospital appointment, leaving insufficient processing time for permits.