



Oncology outpatient pharmacy at Shifa hospital. Shortage of chemotherapy drugs are a main reason for referrals, October 2015 ©WHO

## Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 2 (March 24, 2016)

### Summary: February 2016

#### Erez crossing

- **Approval rates drop for patients' permits:** Of 2,006 patient applications submitted for permits to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in February, 71.59% were approved. Sixty one patients (3.04%), including four children and four elderly persons over 60 years, were denied and 509 patients (25.37%), including 152 children and 60 elderly people over 60, received no response to their applications (Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza).
- **High number of patients requested for security interview (GSS):** 71 patients, among them 16 females, were requested for GSS interviews during February. (See page 6)
- **Delays drop approval rate for patient companions' permit applications to 63%.** (See page 5)

#### Rafah exit

- **3 days of access to Egypt during February:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open only for 3 days allowing 62 patients and 61 companions among 2,349 travellers to cross to Egypt for health care. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza through Egypt during the month.

#### Ministry of Health Referrals in February

- Ministry of Health referred **2,269 patients** in February to outside care with an estimated cost of **NIS 10,864,505**. The top 5 needed procedures for Gaza patients were in oncology, MRI, hematology, heart catheterization, and pediatrics.

## REFERRALS

### Referrals of Gaza patients<sup>1</sup>

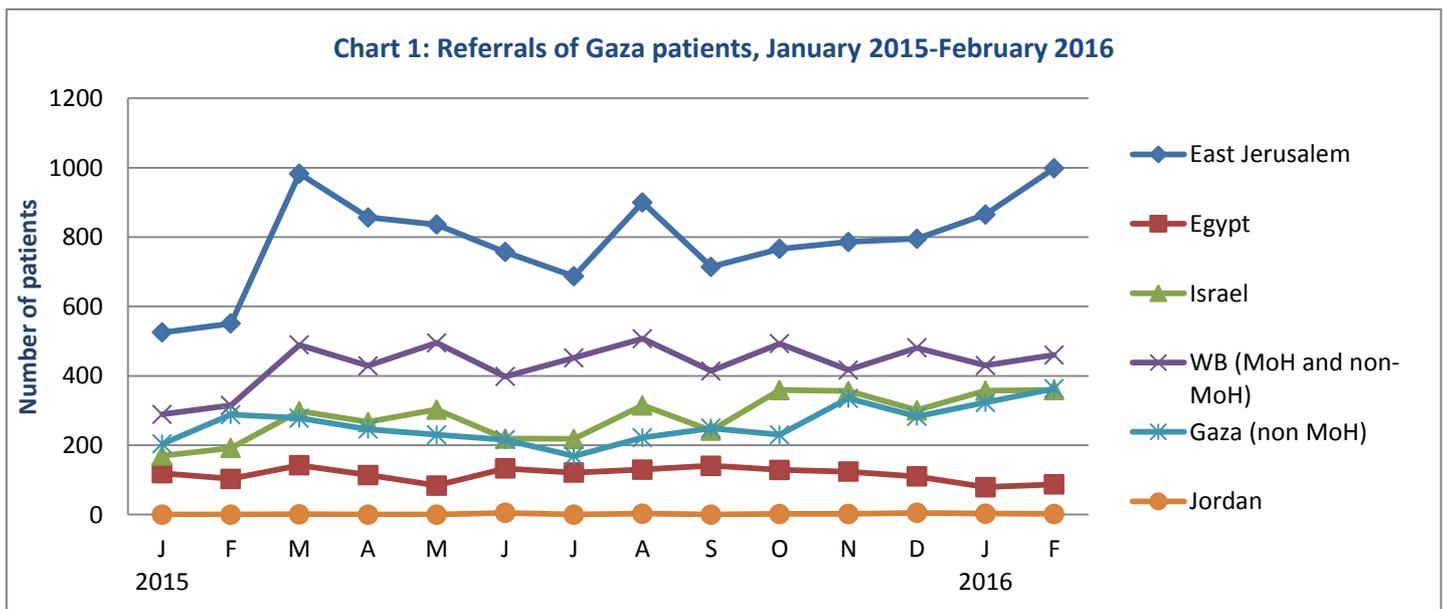
The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 2,269 referrals<sup>1</sup> for Gaza patients in February, according to the Medical Referral Directorate data in Ramallah (**Table 1**), 14% higher than the monthly average in 2015. The highest number ever were to East Jerusalem hospitals, 998 (44%). The remaining were distributed to West Bank hospitals (20%), Israeli hospitals (16%) and within Gaza (16%). Referrals to Egypt (4%) remained low due to limited access.

Compared to the monthly average in 2015, referrals were higher to non-MoH facilities in Gaza (45%), to Israeli hospitals (15%) and to East Jerusalem hospitals (23%), and lower to Egypt (37%) and to West Bank hospitals (4%) than the monthly average (**Table 1** and **Chart 1**).

Referral Destination	2015 monthly Average	Jan	Feb	Total
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	251	323	363	686
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	477	430	460	890
East Jerusalem	809	865	998	1863
Jordan	3	3	2	5
Israel	312	357	359	716
Egypt	139	79	87	166
<b>Total</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>2,057</b>	<b>2269</b>	<b>4326</b>

Source: MoH Medical Referral Directorate, Ramallah, March 12, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

There was a small gender gap in February referrals: 48.04% of referrals issued for Gaza patients were for females while 51.96% were for males. 26.7% of all referrals were for children under the age of 18 while 21.5% were for elderly patients over 60 years old.



The specialties needed for Gaza referrals were mainly: oncology - 570 referrals (25%), MRI - 157 (7%), hematology - 156 (7%), heart catheterization - 145 (6.4%), pediatrics - 140 (6%), orthopedics - 138 (6%), nuclear medicine - 127 (5.6%), ophthalmology - 120 (5.3%), neurosurgery - 90 (4%), internal medicine - 70 (3%). The remaining 556 (24.5%) were for 24 other specialties.

The Referral Directorate in Ramallah reported an estimated cost of **NIS 10,864,505** for the 2,269 referrals for Gaza patients in February.

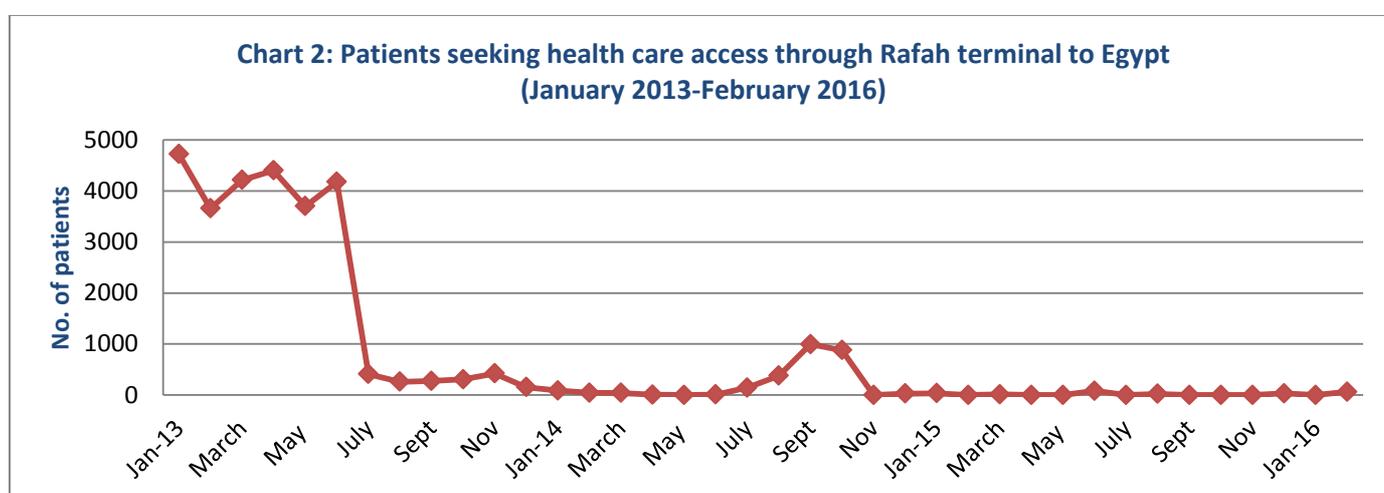
<sup>1</sup> Since October 2015 the referral data used in the WHO monthly reports reflect the financial decision-based data for Gaza patients, as received from the MoH Medical Referral Directorate in Ramallah, rather than the number of unique patients. This data includes renewals of referrals for Gaza patients to Egypt who are still waiting for access through Rafah, approvals for 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 WHO monthly reports. The data have been adjusted in the tables so that trends can be evaluated. Since 2010, WHO's annual reports are based on data from the MoH Medical Referral Directorate in Ramallah.

## ACCESS

Of the 2,269 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in February, 1,819 (80.2%) required Israeli permits for access through Erez checkpoint and 87 (4%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and required the Rafah border to be accessible).

**Limited access to Egypt during February:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open for 3 days and closed for 26 days during February. 62 patients, and 61 patient-companions, were allowed to cross toward Egypt to seek medical care. Patients were only 2.6% of all travellers (2,349). Of all humanitarian travellers, 298 (12.7%) were denied access and returned to Gaza. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza during the month.

In 2015, the Rafah crossing was open only 26 days for humanitarian cases, allowing only 178 patients to travel into Egypt for health care. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah terminal to Egypt monthly for health-related reasons (**Chart 2**).

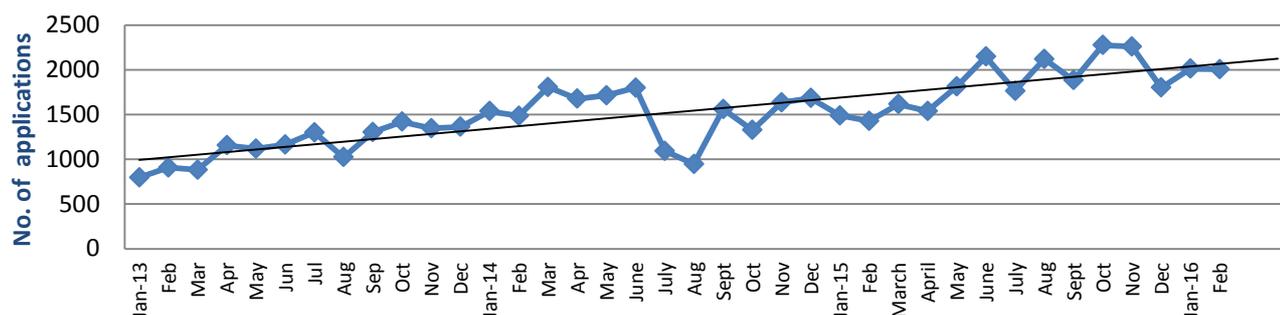


**Access through Erez crossing:** In February, there were 2,006 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care (50.15% males and 49.85% females). 32% were applications for children under 18 years and 15.5% were for elderly people above 60. Permit applications submitted this month were mainly for patients who need health care in oncology, 568 (28.3%), cardiology, 193 (9.6%), ophthalmology, 175 (8.7%), orthopedics, 153 (7.6%), pediatrics, 152 (7.6%), hematology, 148 (7.4%), neurosurgery, 105 (5%), and urology 75 (3.7%). The remaining 437 (21.8%) applications were for 18 other specialties.

Of the total permit applications, 970 (48.35%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, 535 (26.67%) to the West Bank, 492 (24.53%) to Israel, and 9 (0.45%) to Jordan. The top receiving hospitals in February were Makassed, 456 (22.73%), Augusta Victoria, 356 (17.75%), Najah University in Nablus, 217 (10.82%), Tel-Hashomir 141 (7.03%), Al-Ahli hospital in Hebron, 127 (6.33%), Hadassah Ein Karem, 117 (5.83%) and St. John hospital, 114 (5.68%).

The total number in February was 8.7% higher than the monthly average in 2015. In the past 3 years (**Chart 3**) there has been a trend toward higher demand for access to health care through Erez due to lack of resources in the health system in Gaza and blocked access to Egypt, especially for private patients.

**Chart 3: Total number of patient permit applications to cross Erez  
(January 2013 - February 2016)**



The process of applying for a permit is time-consuming for the patient and complicated, sometimes requiring multiple attempts which delays health care. The patient must have a valid financial commitment from the Palestinian MoH and documentation of an appointment from the receiving hospital. If the validity of either expires before the patient receives a permit, the application process must be repeated. Patients also sometimes reapply after being denied a permit, or if the treatment is urgent and no response has been received. February data showed that out of the 2,006 applications submitted in the Palestinian coordination office, 181 (9%) applications were repeated attempts.

In February, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported that 1,436 (71.59%) applications for permits for patients were approved (**Table 2**), 6.6% lower than the previous month and 5.07% lower than the monthly average in 2015. 61 applicants (3.04%) were denied access. 509 (25.37%) did not receive an answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

Permit applications should be submitted to the Israeli district liaison office 7-10 days prior to the hospital appointment date. In February, out of the total 2,006 applications from patients with hospital appointments scheduled during the month, 234 (11.67%) were submitted less than a week before the referral hospital appointment date, 657 (32.75%) applications were submitted 8-14 days before the appointment, 1,030 (51.35%) were 15-30 days before, and 81 (4.04%) were more than 30 days before the hospital appointment. 4 (0.20%) applications were missed.

**Table 2: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS interviews, February 2016**

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	97	114	78	91	0	0	19	23	0	0
4 - 17	189	236	136	175	2	2	51	59	0	1
18- 40	266	250	176	146	10	18	80	86	12	27
41 - 60	281	263	224	164	8	17	49	82	3	25
Over 60	167	143	141	105	0	4	26	34	1	2
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>1000</b>	<b>1006</b>	<b>755</b>	<b>681</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>284</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2006</b>		<b>1,436 (71.59%)</b>		<b>61 (3.04%)</b>		<b>509 (25.37%)</b>		<b>71 (3.54%)</b>	

\* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH –Gaza

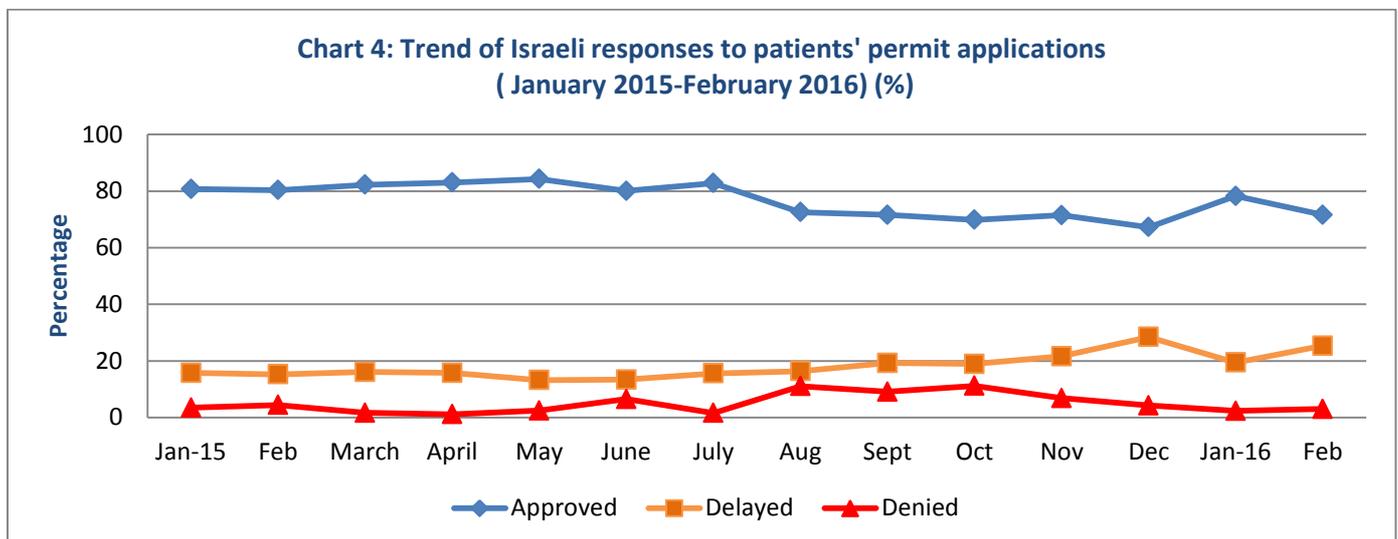
**Table 3** shows that total patient permit applications in February 2016 were 40.4% higher than the corresponding month in 2015 while the approval rate was 8.74% lower. Denial rate was slightly lower than in February 2015 while delayed rate was 10% higher. The total number of permit applications in the period January-February 2016 was 37.7% higher than the corresponding period in 2015 but the approval rate was 5.64% lower.

**Table 3: Israeli District Liaison Office decisions on permit requests to cross Erez, by response, and sex of applicant (2016 compared to 2015)**

Period	February 2015		February 2016		January -February 2015		January–February 2016	
Total	1,429 (F:655; M:774)		2,006 (F:1000; M:1006)		2,918 (F:1,352; M:1,566)		4,017 (F:1,961;M:2,056)	
Approved	1,148 (F:560; M:588)	80.33%	1,436 (F:755; M:681)	71.59%	2,350 (F:1,160; M:1,190)	80.54%	3,009 (F:1,545;M:1,464)	74.90%
Denied	63 (F:15; M:48)	4.41%	61 (F:20; M:41)	3.04%	115 (F:20; M:95)	3.94%	108 (F:41;M:67)	2.69%
Delayed	218 (F:80; M:138)	15.26%	509 (F:225; M:284)	25.37%	453 (F:172; M:281)	15.52%	900 (F:375;M:525)	22.41%
-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	10 (F:5;M:5)	0.70%	71 (F:16; M:55)	3.44%	32 (F:12; M:20)	1.10%	183 (F:50;M:133)	4.55%

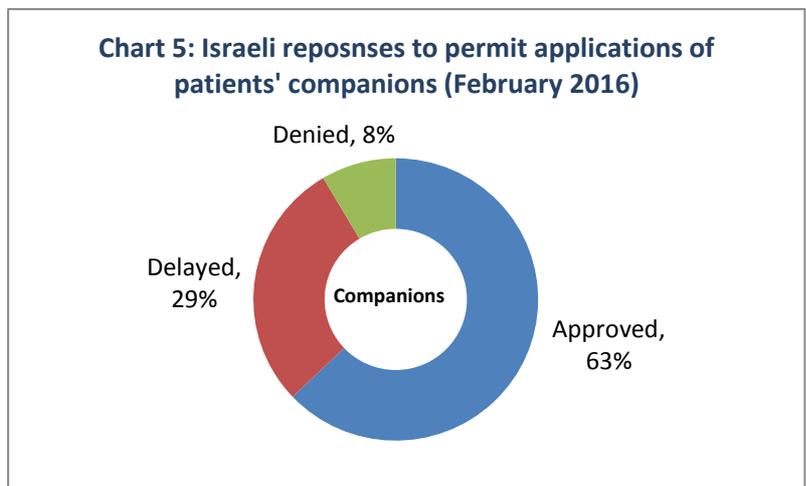
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Chart 4** shows a decline after July 2015 in Israeli approvals for patients' permit applications and an increase in delays until December 2015. In January 2016, the approval rate improved but declined again in February. Denials were decreased but delays were higher compared to 2015 average, possibly due to the increase in requests for security interviews.



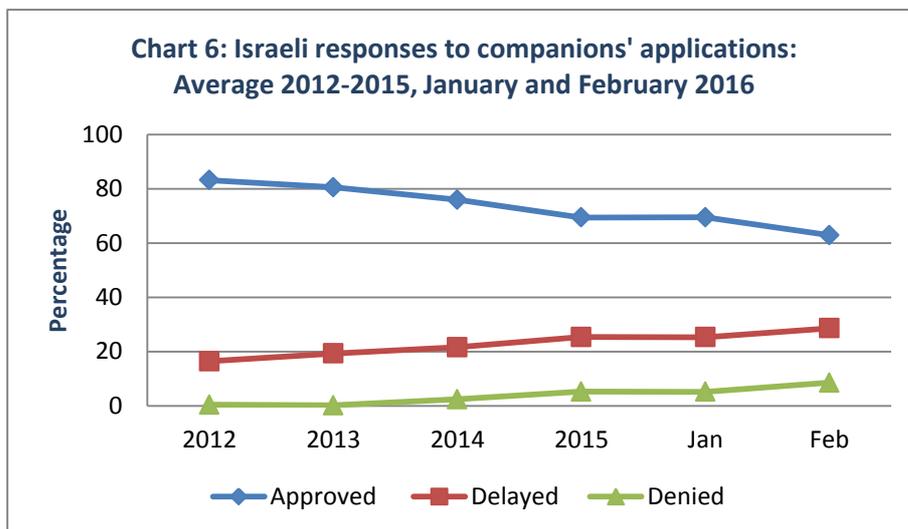
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Patient companions:** In February, 2,081 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. 63% were approved, 6.5% lower than the average for 2015. 8% were denied and 29% were pending (**chart 5**). Only one first-degree relative is permitted and permits are now conditional on security clearance for those aged up to 55 years.



**Chart 6** shows a steady decline in the trend of average approval rate from January 2012 to February 2016. Denials and delays in responses to companions' applications have increased correspondingly in the same period.

**Financial coverage:** 92.22% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in February were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.74% were self-funded, and 2.54% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1% by Peres Center for Peace, 1% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.35% by the Military Medical Services, 0.05% by an insurance company and 0.10% by other organizations.



**Denied care:** 61 patients (41 males; 20 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 4 children and 4 patients over 60 years old. Of the denied patients, 52 patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals and 9 in Israel. 59 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 1 was self-funded and 1 was funded by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel. Of those denied: 1.64% (1 patient) had submitted his application less than 8 days before the hospital appointment; 27.87% (17) had waited for a response for 8-14 days; 63.93% (39) waited 15-30 days; 4.92% (3) patients waited more than 30 days and 1 application was missed. The denied patients had appointments for oncology (16), orthopedics (11), ophthalmology (8), neurosurgery (5), urology (3), cardiology (3), heart surgery (2), ENT (2), vascular surgery (2), nephrology (2), in addition to 1 patient in each for neurology, pediatrics, endocrinology, general surgery, hematology, dermatology and ICU.

**Delayed care:** 509 patient applicants (284 males; 225 females) were delayed in reaching health care in February, among them 152 children and 60 patients over the age of 60; they received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 509 patients delayed, 77.02% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 21.81% in Israel, and 1.18% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in oncology (118), cardiology (52), orthopedics (51), pediatrics (44), ophthalmology (42), urology (33), hematology (27), neurosurgery (24), nuclear medicine (23), general surgery (17), ENT (14), obstetrics/gynecology (11), vascular surgery (11), internal medicine (11), and the remaining (31) were for 10 other specialties.

Out of 509 delayed patient applicants, 6.88% had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date. However, 36.35% waited 8-14 days, 53.63% waited 15-30 days and 3.14% waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request. 41 patients out of the delayed were eventually approved late, within the first 2 weeks of March 2016.

**Security Interviews:** 71 patients (55 males; 16 females), including a male from the age group 4-17 and 3 males over 60, were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). 19 were approved after interviews. The number of patients requested for a security interview as a condition to process their permit applications has increased dramatically since November 2015 (**Chart 7**). The number of patients requested for GSS in February was 340% of the monthly average of 2015 and the second highest monthly number since November 2009 when 122 patients were requested for GSS. January and February data showed significant increase in the number of females requested for GSS 30.7% and 22.5% respectively compared to the monthly average of 2015 (18%). According to the Palestinian civil affairs and the district liaison office, this increase might be attributed to a recent change of intelligence officer personnel at Erez and to widening of the age group for security clearance of companions from 16-35 years to 16-55 years.

### Patients and companions cross Erez:

The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,342 Gaza patients (and 1,243 companions) crossed Erez in February to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals; of these, 78 patients were transferred by ambulance (using two ambulances and back-to-back procedures), with 75 companions. Erez crossing was open for 25 days during regular daytime working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays) in February.

