



From January to March 2016, the Rafah border days only; 62 patients were able to travel into Egypt for health care ©WHO

## Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 2 (April 26, 2016)

### Summary: March 2016

#### Erez crossing

- **3 in 10 patients delayed or denied permits:** Of 2,205 patient applications submitted in March for permits to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments, 68.93% were approved. 121 patients (5.49%), including five children and five elderly persons over 60 years, were denied and 564 patients (25.58%), including 177 children and 50 elderly people over 60, received no response to their applications (Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza).
- **82 patients requested for security interview (GSS):** 48 males and 34 females were requested for GSS interviews during March (page 7).
- **4 in 10 patient companions delayed or denied permits** (page 5).
- **2 patients arrested at Erez** (page 7).
- **Restricted access for humanitarian health staff through Erez** (page 8).

#### Rafah exit

- **No access to Egypt during March:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was closed over the month. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza through Egypt during the month.

#### Ministry of Health Referrals in March

- Of the **2,363 patients** referred by the Ministry of Health in March to outside care, 1,000 patients were sent to the East Jerusalem hospitals; total estimated cost was **NIS 10,342,514**. The top 5 needed procedures for Gaza patients were in oncology, MRI, paediatrics, haematology, and heart catheterization.

## REFERRALS

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

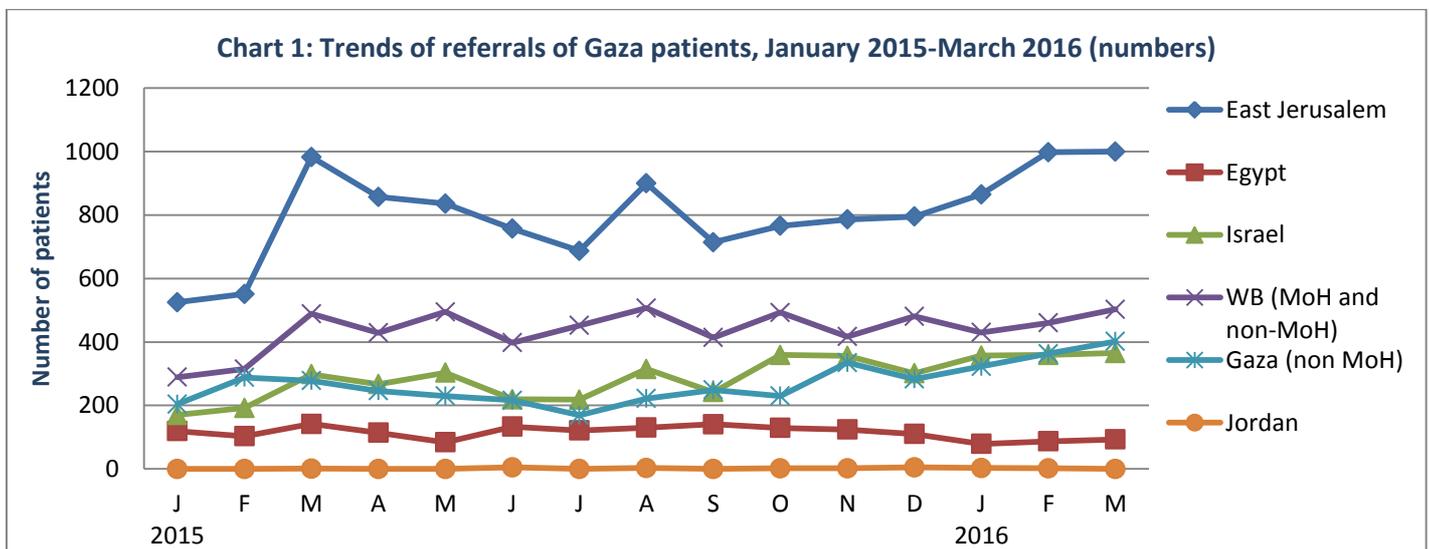
The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 2,363 referrals<sup>1</sup> for Gaza patients in March, according to the Medical Referral Directorate data in Ramallah (**Table 1**), 19% higher than the monthly average in 2015. The highest number ever was to East Jerusalem hospitals, 1000 (42%). The remaining were distributed to West Bank hospitals (21%), within Gaza (17%) and Israeli hospitals (15.5%). Referrals to Egypt (4%) remained low due to limited access.

Referral Destination	2015 monthly average	Jan	Feb	March	Total 2016
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	251	323	363	402	1,088
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	477	430	460	503	1,393
East Jerusalem	809	865	998	1,000	2,863
Jordan	3	3	2	0	5
Israel	312	357	359	365	1,801
Egypt	139	79	87	93	259
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,991</b>	<b>2,057</b>	<b>2,269</b>	<b>2,363</b>	<b>6,689</b>

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

Compared to the monthly average in 2015, referrals were higher to non-MoH facilities in Gaza (60%), to East Jerusalem hospitals (24%), to Israeli hospitals (17%), to West Bank hospitals (5%), and lower to Egypt (33%) than the monthly average (**Table 1** and **Chart 1**). Of the 2,363 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in March, 1,868 (79%) were pending Israeli permits for access through Erez checkpoint and 93 (4%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and required the Rafah border to be accessible).

There was a small gender gap in March referrals: 47.52% of referrals issued for Gaza patients were for females while 52.48% were for males. 29.96% of all referrals were for children under the age of 18 while 20.4% were for elderly patients over 60 years old.



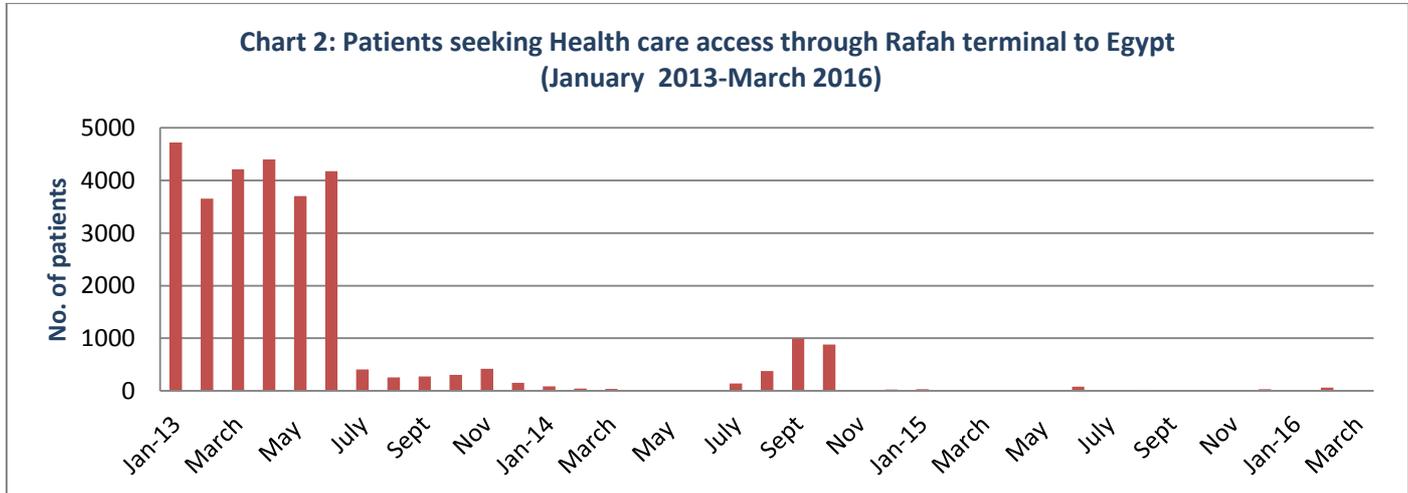
The specialties needed for Gaza referrals were mainly: oncology - 509 referrals (21.54%), MRI - 197 (8.34%), pediatrics - 177 (7.49%), hematology - 149 (6.31%), heart catheterization - 146 (6.18%), orthopedics - 136 (5.76%), ophthalmology - 135 (5.71%), nuclear medicine - 129 (5.46%), neurosurgery - 114 (4.82%), urology - 73 (3.09%). The remaining 598 (25.31%) were for 23 other specialties. The Referral Directorate in Ramallah reported an estimated cost of **NIS 10,342,514** for the 2,363 referrals for Gaza patients in March.

<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

**No access to Egypt during March:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was closed for exit during March. No patients were allowed to cross into Egypt; 18 travellers were allowed to return to Gaza with special coordination. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza during the month.

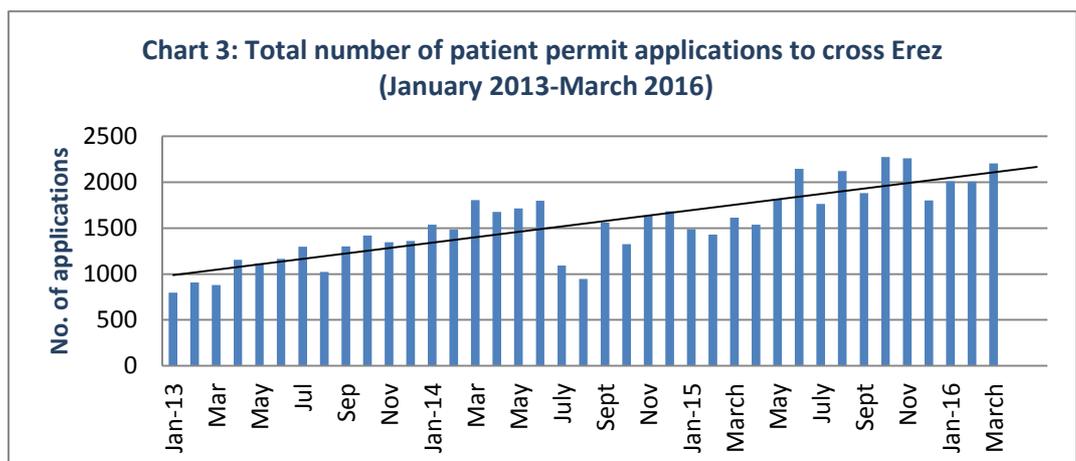
The Rafah crossing was closed for all but 3 days in the first quarter of 2016, allowing only 62 patients to travel into Egypt for health care. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah terminal to Egypt monthly for health-related reasons (**Chart 2**).



**Access through Erez crossing:** In March, there were 2,205 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care (51.7% males and 48.3% females). 32% were applications for children under 18 years and 15.8% were for elderly people above 60. Permit applications submitted this month were mainly for patients who need health care in oncology, 565 (25.62%), pediatrics, 223 (10.11%), orthopedics, 215 (9.75%), cardiology, 200 (9.07%), hematology, 184 (8.34%), ophthalmology, 183 (8.3%), neurosurgery, 131 (5.94%), nuclear medicine, 67 (3.04%), urology 66 (2.99%) and general surgery, 55 (2.49%). The remaining 316 (14.33%) applications were for 18 other specialties.

Of the total permit applications, 1,113 (50.48%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, 603 (27.35%) to the West Bank, 481 (21.81%) to Israel, and 8 (0.36%) to Jordan. The top receiving hospitals in March were Makassed, 564 (25.58%), Augusta Victoria, 395 (17.91%), Najah University in Nablus, 233 (10.57%), Tel-Hashomir 156 (7.07%), Al-Ahli hospital in Hebron, 137 (6.21%), St. John hospital, 122 (5.53%), and Hadassah Ein Karem, 106 (4.81%).

The total number in March was 19.5% 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.



In March, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported that 1,520 (68.93%) applications for permits for patients were approved (**Table 2**), 2.7% lower than the previous month and 7.73% lower than the monthly average in 2015. 121 applicants (5.49%) were denied access. 564 (25.58%) did not receive an answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

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. March data showed that out of the 2,205 applications submitted in the Palestinian coordination office, 228 (10.3%) applications were repeated attempts. 5 attempts for 1 patient, 4 attempts for another. 3 attempts for 17 patients and 2 attempts for 187 patients.

Permit applications should be submitted to the Israeli district liaison office 7-10 days prior to the hospital appointment date. In March, out of the total 2,205 applications from patients with hospital appointments scheduled during the month, 233 (10.57%) were submitted less than a week before the referral hospital appointment date, 723 (32.79%) applications were submitted 8-14 days before the appointment, 1,201 (54.47%) were 15-30 days before, and 48 (2.18%) were more than 30 days before the hospital appointment.

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	103	138	79	99	0	3	24	36	0	0
4 - 17	209	255	155	190	0	2	54	63	0	0
18- 40	283	289	178	129	20	47	85	113	21	23
41 - 60	298	282	220	177	15	29	63	76	12	18
Over 60	172	176	151	142	0	5	21	29	1	7
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>1065</b>	<b>1140</b>	<b>783</b>	<b>737</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2205</b>		<b>1520 (68.93%)</b>		<b>121 (5.49%)</b>		<b>564 (25.58%)</b>		<b>82 (3.72%)</b>	

\* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH, Gaza

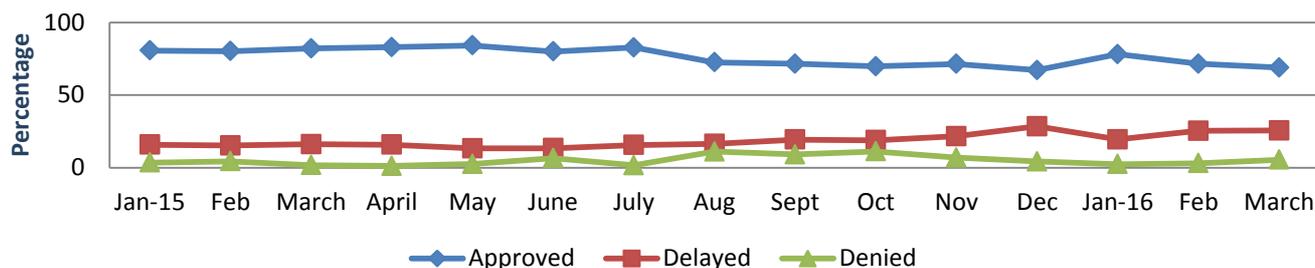
**Table 3** shows that total patient permit applications in March 2016 were 36.5% higher than the corresponding month in 2015 while the approval rate was 13.36% lower. Denial rate was more than 3 times higher in March 2016 while delayed rate was 9.5 % higher. The total number of permit applications in the period January-March 2016 was 37.3% higher, the approval rate was 8.4% lower and the rate of patients called for security interview was quadruple that of the corresponding period in 2015.

Period	March 2015		March 2016		January -March 2015		January-March 2016	
	Total	Approved	Total	Approved	Total	Approved	Total	Approved
Total	1,615 (F:713; M:902)		2,205 (F:1065; M:1140)		4,533 (F:2,065; M:2,468)		6,222 (F:3,026; M:3,196)	
Approved	1,329 (F:613; M:716)	82.29%	1,520 (F:783; M:737)	68.93%	3,679 (F:1,773; M:1,906)	81.16%	4,529 (F:2,328; M:2,201)	72.79%
Denied	27 (F:5; M:22)	1.67%	121 (F:35; M:86)	5.49%	142 (F:25; M:117)	3.13%	229 (F:76; M:153)	3.68%
Delayed	259 (F:95; M:164)	16.04%	564 (F:247; M:317)	25.58%	712 (F:267; M:445)	15.71%	1,464 (F:622; M:842)	23.53%
<i>-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)</i>	17 (F:3; M:14)	1.05%	82 (F:34; M:48)	3.72%	49 (F:15; M:34)	1.08%	265 (F:84; M:181)	4.26%

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 and further in March. Denials and delays were higher compared to 2015 average, possibly due to the increase in requests for security interviews.

**Chart 4: Trend of Israeli responses to patients' permit applications, (January 2015-March 2016) (%)**



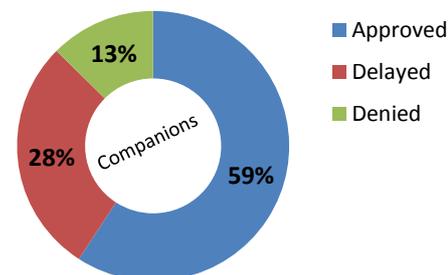
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Financial coverage:** 94% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in March were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.68% were self-funded, and 1.22% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 0.91% by Peres Center for Peace, 0.73% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.36% by the Military Medical Services, and 0.09% by other organizations.

**Patient companions:** In March, 2,323 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. 59.2% were approved, 10.3% lower than the average for 2015.

12.6% were denied and 28% 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 5: Israeli responses to permit applications of patients' companions (March 2016)**

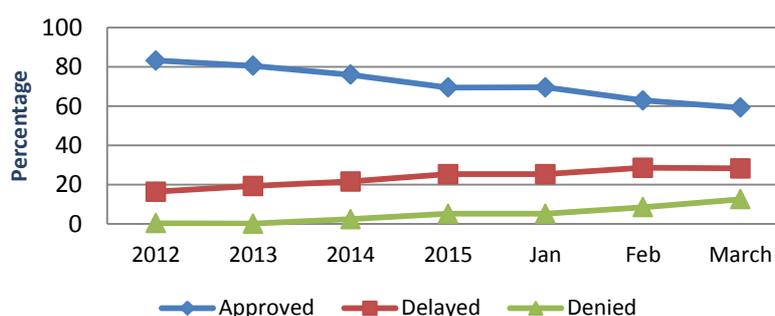


**Chart 6** shows a steady decline in the trend of average approval rate from January 2012 to March 2016. Denials and delays in responses to companions' applications have increased correspondingly in the same period.

**Denied care:** 121 patients (86 males; 35 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 5 children and 5 patients over 60 years old. Of the denied patients, 109 patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 11 in Israel and 1 in Jordan. 117 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 3 were self-funded and 1 was funded by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel. Of those denied: 32.23% (39) had waited for a response for 8-14 days;

63.64% (77) waited 15-30 days; and 4.13% (5) patients waited more than 30 days. The denied patients had appointments for orthopedics (35); oncology and ophthalmology (15) each; neurosurgery (11); urology (9); ENT (5); general surgery, internal medicine, nuclear medicine, pediatrics and cardiology (4) each; nephrology and neurology (3) each; obstetrics/gynecology and vascular surgery (2) each; and (1) for hematology.

**Chart 6: Israeli Responses to companions' applications: Average 2012-2015 compared to January - March 2016**



**Delayed care:** 564 patient applicants (317 males; 247 females) were delayed in reaching health care in March, among them 177 children and 50 patients over the age of 60; they received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 564 patients delayed, 78.73% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 20.21% in Israel, and 1.06% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in oncology (105); pediatrics (61); orthopedics (60); cardiology (58); ophthalmology (53); hematology (39); neurosurgery (38); nuclear medicine (27); ENT (20); urology (18); nephrology (13); internal medicine and nephrology (10) each; endocrinology, general surgery and vascular surgery (9) each; plastic surgery

and gynecology/obstetrics (7) each; heart surgery (6); heart catheterization (2); and 1 each for chest disease, dermatology and intensive care.

Out of 564 delayed patient applicants, 6.74% had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date, less than the recommended lead time. However, 31.91% were still waiting after 8-14 days, 57.45% for 15-30 days and 3.9% waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request. 43 patients out of the delayed were eventually approved late, within the first 2 weeks of April 2016, and required new hospital appointments.

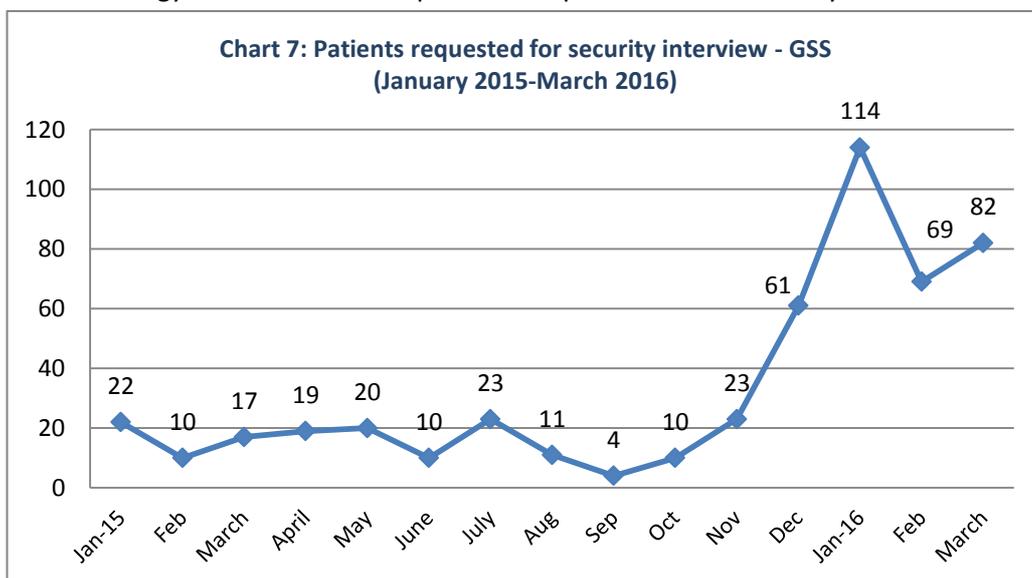
### 2 patients arrested

**1) Mohammed Abu-Ouda**, a 34-year-old patient, a fisherman from Rafah, accompanied by his father Kamal, traveled to Erez checkpoint early on March 28, both with approved permits. Mohammed was to travel to Musallam specialty center in the West Bank for treatment. Mohammed was requested for an interview with an Israeli officer while his father remained waiting. At 5:30 pm, the father was ordered to return to Gaza and told that Mohammed would follow in 30 minutes. The father remained waiting at the Palestinian side of the terminal until 10:00 pm but his son did not appear. The father was told by the Palestinian District Coordination office that Mohammed was arrested. Mohammed suffered a dislocation of a lumbar vertebra with a spinal stenosis and was scheduled for surgery. According to his father, it was his first attempt to cross Erez and the referral process was smooth. Mohammed was released 21 days later, on April 18, 2016, when appeared in court. His father reported, "The Israeli security asked to extend his detention but the court decided to release him."

**2) Hani Fathi Shourab Isleem**, a 40-year-old resident of Gaza City, was arrested at Erez checkpoint when he attempted to cross for medical treatment at Makassed hospital in East Jerusalem. His brother reported that Hani went to Erez at 8 am, March 24, 2016, to travel to Makassed hospital in Jerusalem for a joint replacement in his leg. According to the brother, the family received a phone call at 5 pm that day from someone who said he was an Israeli intelligence officer and informed them of his arrest. AlMezan center for human rights reported that Hani is detained in Ashkelon prison and was not permitted to meet his lawyer in the first 4 days of his detention. He is still detained in Ashkelon prison, as of this date.

\*Source: Al Mezan center for human rights and media sources.

**Security interviews:** 82 patients (48 males; 34 females), 74 aged between 18-60 and 8 (7 males; 1 female) over 60, were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). Of 82 patients requested for GSS, 21 were oncology patients, 10 neurosurgery, 7 orthopedics, 7 cardiology, 7 hematology, 6 nuclear medicine, 5 general surgery, 5 ophthalmology, 4 urology, 3 neurology, 2 vascular, 2 nephrology, 1 heart catheterization, 1 gynecology/obstetric and 1 endocrinology. 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 March was more than 4 times the monthly average in 2015 and the second highest monthly number since November 2009 when 122 patients were requested for GSS. March data showed significant increase in the percentage of females requested for GSS (41.5%) compared to



the monthly average of 2015 (35%). 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 1,452 Gaza patients (and 1,341 companions) crossed Erez in March to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals; of these, 68 patients were transferred by ambulance (using two ambulances and back-to-back procedures), with 68 companions. Erez crossing was open for 27 days during regular daytime working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays) in March.

**Humanitarian health staff face increasing access difficulties:** WHO has access to apply for its employees and to other health employees through an online system with the Israeli COGAT. Statistics from the beginning of the year show that 19 requests were made for permits for Gaza WHO staff to exit Erez for duty travel, but only 9 were granted. Three staff who requested permits were called to Erez for security interviews but were returned after waiting several hours, two of whom after Israeli authorities confiscated their still-valid permits. Of 90 requests made by WHO for health staff from the Ministry of Health, Health Cluster members or WHO staff from the West Bank and Jerusalem to enter Jerusalem, only 36 were granted. Requests not granted are listed as 'in process.'