



The Palestinian
Ministry of Health
referral department in
Gaza, April 2015
– © WHO

Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD 4 (May 27, 2015)

Summary: April 2015

Rafah closed, Erez remains difficult

- **Rafah border:** April was the second month in 2015 that the border terminal was completely closed by Egypt in both directions for all travellers, including for patients and medical aid. The Rafah border with Egypt has been opened for 5 of the 120 days this year, in January for 3 days and March for 2 days).
- **Access through Erez:** 1,539 patients applied for permits to cross Erez checkpoint: 83.04% of patients were approved. 15.79% received no response to their applications (243 patients, including 91 children and 12 over 60) and 1.17% were denied permits (18 patients, including 2 children and 2 elderly).
- **Interrogations:** 19 patients (4 females and 15 males) were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit. None of them was approved.

MoH referrals increase significantly

- **April was the second highest month in number of Ministry of Health referrals of Gaza patients, recorded by WHO:** According to the Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza, 1,913 referrals were issued in April for specialized treatment unavailable in Gaza in MoH health facilities, 26% more than the monthly average in 2014. (The 2,191 referrals in March were the highest ever recorded.) The higher need for referrals may be a result of the cumulative shortages in medicines and medical capacity in Gaza, as well as the closure of Rafah which has reduced access particularly for private patients and encouraged more patients to seek treatment from the Ministry of Health.
- **Gender gap:** The gender gap in Gaza referrals remained very wide: 59.12% male patients versus 40.88% female patients. 28.3% of all referrals were for children aged 0-17 years and 17% were for patients aged over 60 years.

REFERRALS

Referrals of Gaza patients

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,913 referrals for Gaza patients in April, according to the Referral Abroad Department (RAD) data in Gaza,¹ 26% higher than the monthly average of 2014 and the second highest after March recorded by WHO since 2009 (**Table 1; Chart 1**). An accumulation of patients who deferred or were delayed travel in the post-conflict period, especially as a result of the closure of Rafah, may explain the increase, following a lower than usual number of referrals in late 2014. In particular, referrals to East Jerusalem and to West

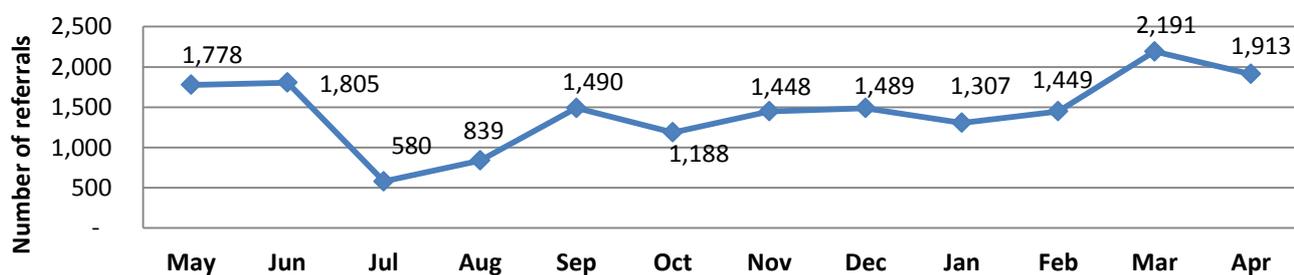
Table 1: MoH Referrals of Gaza patients, by destination, January-April 2015, compared to 2014 monthly average

Referral Destination	2014 (monthly average)	January 2015	February 2015	March 2015	April 2015	TOTAL
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	267	204	288	278	246	1,016
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	259	289	315	489	429	1,522
East Jerusalem	529	525	551	983	857	2,916
Jordan	1	0	0	1	0	1
Israel	286	170	192	298	267	927
Egypt	169	119	103	142	114	478
Total	1,511	1,307	1,449	2,191	1,913	6,860

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza

Bank hospitals increased sharply, 62% and 65% respectively, compared to the monthly averages in 2014. Referrals to Egypt decreased to 114 (67% of the monthly average in 2014), however no patients could travel to Egypt in April due to the closed border. In 2015 so far, 478 patients were referred to Egypt but only 42 were able to travel on the 5 days the border was open. Referrals to Israeli medical facilities and referrals to non-MoH facilities in Gaza remained near the monthly average in 2014 (**Chart 2**). There were 246 referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza and were mainly for MRI (111), heart catheterization (83), and the remaining 52 referrals were in 14 different specialties.

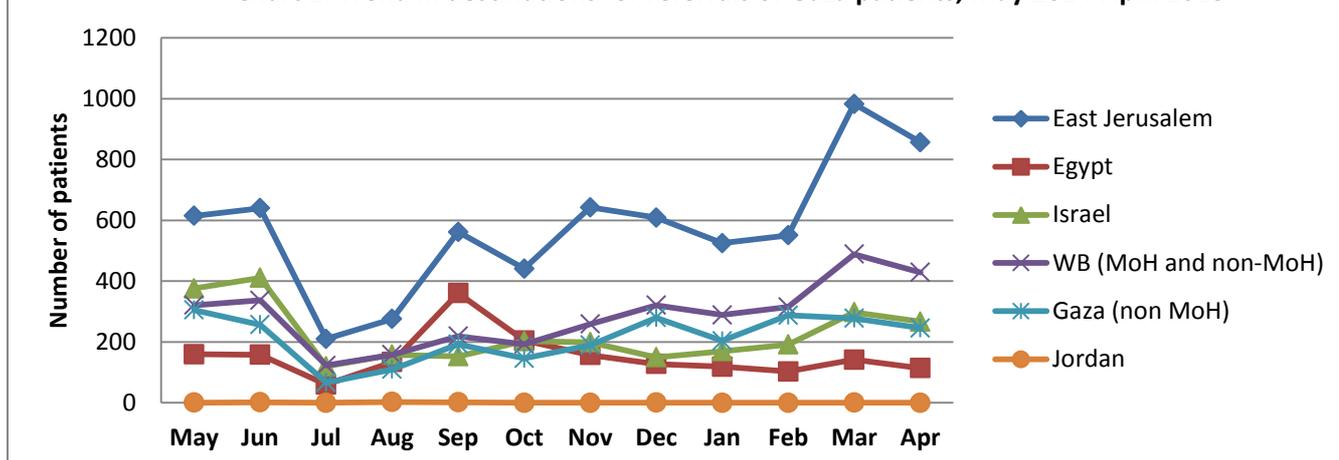
Chart 1: Trend of total MoH monthly referrals issued to Gaza patients, May 2014 - April 2015



In April the processing time of patients' applications for referral by the local office in Gaza and the central Service Purchasing Department (SPD) in Ramallah improved significantly compared to recent months. The improvement is attributed in part to WHO's provision in March of a web-based approval tracking system to facilitate communications between the Gaza and Ramallah offices. However, management of hospital appointments is still difficult due to high occupancy rates in hospitals.

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.

Chart 2: Trend in destinations for referrals of Gaza patients, May 2014-April 2015



Of the 1,913 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in April, 1,667 (87%) were to health facilities outside Gaza: 1,553 patients (81%) required permits from Israeli authorities to exit through Erez crossing and 114 (5.96%) required approvals from Egypt to exit through Rafah.

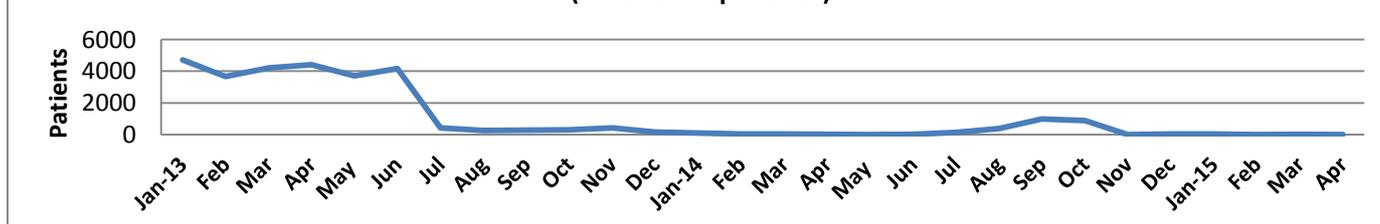
28.3% of all patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 17% were elderly patients over 60. Female referral patients were 40.88% of the total, compared to 59.12% male patients. 91% of referrals in April were for hospital admissions and 9% for outpatient clinics.

Medical reasons for referrals: The top ten specialties requiring referrals for treatment were: oncology—286 referrals (14.95%), orthopaedic surgery—189 (9.88%), ophthalmology—155 (8.1%), MRI—119 (6.22%), nuclear medicine—118 (6.17%), heart catheterization—114 (5.96%), paediatrics—110 (5.75%), neurosurgery—107 (5.59%), haematology—97 (5.07%), heart surgery—81 (4.23%), and the remaining 537 (28.07%) referrals were to 20 other specialities. The estimated cost for April referrals based on the central SPD data² in Ramallah was NIS 9,814,000.

Access through Rafah terminal

No access to Egypt in April: According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the terminal was closed by the Egyptian authorities in both directions on all days of April. No travellers were allowed to leave or return to Gaza. According to Palestinian authorities at the terminal, there was no medical aid or medical delegations allowed 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 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.

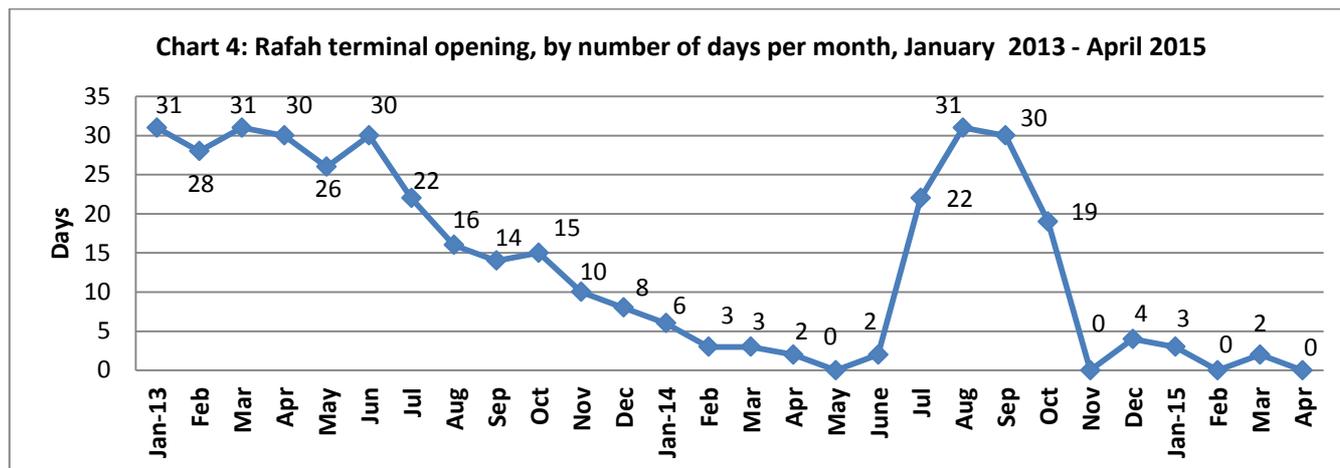
Chart 3: Gaza patients seeking healthcare access through Rafah terminal (Jan 2013 - April 2015)



From January to April 2015, the terminal was opened on only 5 days. The number of days the terminal opened was also decreased significantly since July 2013 and continue until the war in the last summer when the Egyptian authorities opened the terminal for referral of war casualties and let Egyptian and foreign passport holders to get out from the Gaza Strip. The terminal was closed again by Egypt in November 2014. The terminal was completely

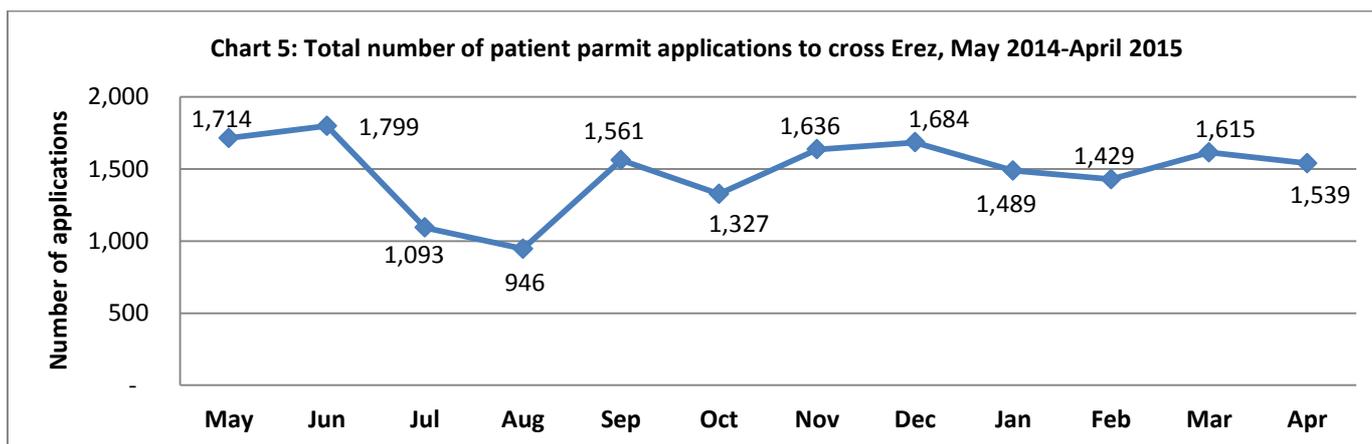
² The central SPD in Ramallah tabulates the total number of financial approval decisions for patients on one referral, which may include additional procedures or hospital readmissions for the same patient. SPD data for March indicates 201 additional referrals for Gaza in April. For monthly comparisons, WHO uses the data from the MoH RAD in Gaza.

closed in May and November 2014 and in February and April 2015, resulting in access to Egypt being extremely limited (**Chart 4**).



Access through Erez

In April, the total number of patients' applications for Israeli permits to cross Erez was 1,539, 5% less than the previous month and 1% higher than 2014 monthly average of 1,522 applications (**Chart 5**). Out of the 1,539 permit applications, 796 (51.72%) were for patients destined to East Jerusalem, 409 (26.58%) to West Bank, 328 (21.31%) to Israel, and 6 (0.39%) to Jordan.



In April, 1,278 (83.04%) of patients' permit applications were approved (**Table 2**). 18 applicants (1.17%) were denied access. 243 (15.79%) did not receive a positive answer for their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

There were 7% fewer permit applications for the period January to April 2015 than for the same period in 2014 and patients were more likely to be denied, delayed and requested to attend security interviews. April 2015 approval rate was 5% higher than in 2014 and 4.4% fewer patients were delayed in the same month (**Table 3**).

Patient companions: In April, 1,664 applications for patient companions were submitted to the Israeli authorities. 72.42% of them were approved, 26.5% were pending and 1.08% were denied.

Financial coverage: 94.09% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in April were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.34% were self-funded, 1.3% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1.17% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.97% by Peres Center for Peace, 0.06% by MSF and 0.06% by UNRWA. **Chart 6** shows a mild improvement in approvals of patients' permit applications in the last 3 months while fewer patients were denied or delayed.

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

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	83	96	66	85	0	0	17	11	0	0
4 - 17	141	175	105	146	2	0	34	29	0	0
18- 40	182	205	143	139	0	6	39	60	4	9
41 - 60	190	211	178	174	3	5	9	32	0	5
Over 60	128	128	125	117	1	1	2	10	0	1
Sub-total	724	815	617	661	6	12	101	142	4	15
Total	1,539		1,278 (83.04%)		18 (1.17%)		243 (15.79%)		19 (1.23%)	

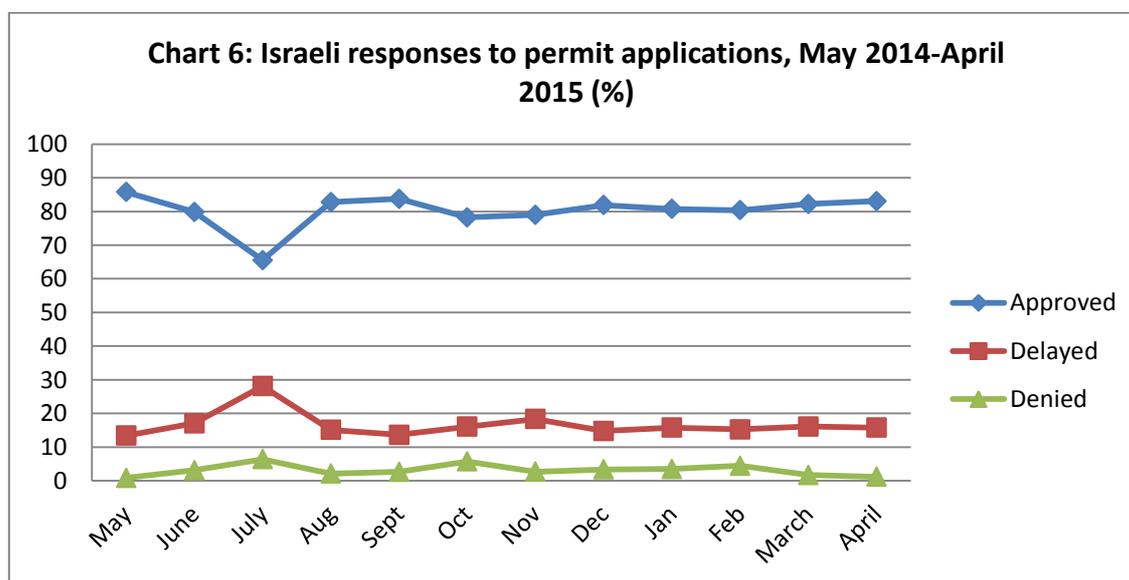
* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

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	April 2014		April 2015		Jan-April 2014		January – April 2015	
Total	1677 (F:798; M:879)		1,539 (F:724; M:815)		6,506 (F:3034; M:3472)		6,072 (F:2,789;M:3,283)	
Approved	1308 (F:650; M:658)	77.99%	1,278 (F:617; M:661)	83.04%	5,500 (F:2689; M:2811)	84.54%	4,957 (F:2,390;M:2,567)	81.64%
Denied	31 (F:13; M:18)	1.85%	18 (F:6; M:12)	1.17%	151 (F:51; M:100)	2.32%	160 (F:31;M:129)	2.63%
Delayed	338 (F:135; M:203)	20.15%	243 (F:101; M:142)	15.79%	855 (F:294; M:561)	13.14%	955 (F:368;M:587)	15.73%
<i>-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)</i>	4 (F:0;M:4)	0.24%	19 (F4; M:15)	1.23%	68 (F:8; M:60)	1.05%	68 (F:19;M:49)	1.12%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Denied care: 18 patients (6 females; 12 males) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 2 children and 2 persons over 60 years. 16 of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 1 in Israel and 1 in Jordan. Of the denied patients, 17 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, and 1 was self-funded. 6 patients had waited for a response for 1-7 days, 5 waited 8-14 days, 6 waited 15-30 days and 1 waited more than 30 days before receiving a denial. Of those denied, 4 patients had appointments for neurosurgery, 3 for ophthalmology, 3 for orthopedics, 2 for hematology and 1 patient each for nephrology, oncology, pediatrics, urology, vascular surgery and dermatology.

What happens to patients who are denied permits?

WHO carried out a telephone survey on May 24 to examine the status of the 18 patients hospital appointments in April 2015 and who had been denied permits. Of the 13 denied patients who responded, 4 said they had applied again and received permits (1 in April 2015 and 3 in May 2015). Of the 9 patients who are still denied access, 6 appealed to human rights organizations to help them receive permits, and 3 reported no further action.

Delayed care: 243 patient applicants (142 males; 101 females), including 91 children and 12 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 243 patients delayed, 71.2% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 27.98% in Israel, and 0.82% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in oncology (33), ophthalmology (30), cardiology (27), orthopedics (24), pediatrics (24), nuclear medicine (19), hematology (15), neurosurgery (11), neurology (9), urology (9), nephrology (8), general surgery (6), ob/gyn (5), internal medicine (4), ICU (4), endocrinology (3), heart surgery (3), ENT (3), vascular surgery (3), MRI (1), lab (1) and 1 other. Non-urgent 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 243 delayed patient applicants, 32.51% waited 1-7 days, 41.98% waited 8-14 days, 23.87% waited 15-30 days and 1.65% waited more than 30 days. 19 patients out of the delayed were approved within the first 2 weeks of May.

Security Interviews: 19 patients (15 males; 4 females), 18 aged 18-40, and 1 over 60 year old were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). None of these patients was approved after the interview.

Patients and companions crossed Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,147 patients (and 1,098 companions) crossed Erez in April to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals, including 78 transferred by ambulance (back-to-back). Erez crossing was open for 24 days with regular day-time working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays and 2 Israeli holidays) during the month.