



Rafah crossing, Gaza Strip, in 2013. No patients were permitted to cross to Egypt in May 2014. ©WHO oPt

Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD 5 (June 30, 2014)

Summary: May 2014

Access

- **High need for access through Erez:** In May the volume of patient applications to Israeli authorities to cross Erez checkpoint for health access (1,714 patients) was 49% higher than the monthly average in 2013. Monthly trends in 2014 have been the highest since the WHO began monitoring access through Erez. The increase in demand reflects the closure of the Rafah border to Egypt and lack of drugs, especially chemotherapy and lack of medical disposables.
- **Permit approval rate back to average:** 85.76% of patient applicants were approved a permit in May 2014, 1% higher than the average of Jan-April 2014. 14 (0.82%) patients (6 females and 8 males, including 5 children) were denied permits. 13.42% of patients who applied (230 patients: 79 females and 151 males, including 43 children and 20 elderly people over 60) received no response to their applications and their medical treatment was delayed as a result.
- **12 patients interrogated:** 10 men and 2 women aged between 18-60 years were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit to cross Erez. One patient so far was granted a permit following the security interviews in May.
- **Patient access through Rafah completely stopped:** No Gaza patients were able to travel to Egypt through Rafah in May, compared to more than 3,700 in May 2013, before the closure.
- **An odyssey of suffering for Gaza patient denied access to healthcare (case study page 5).**

Referrals

- **Decrease in MoH referrals:** Total MoH referrals of Gaza patients (1,778) to outside facilities were the lowest recorded since the beginning of the year due to a significant decrease in referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza. Still May referrals were 27% higher than the monthly average in 2013.
- **Medical reasons for referrals:** The top ten specialties requiring referrals for treatment were: oncology—256 referrals (14.4%), nuclear medicine—165 (9.28%), MRI—162 (9.11%), ophthalmology—146 (8.21%), heart catheterization—132 (7.42%), orthopaedics—126 (7.09%), paediatrics—111 (6.24%), neurosurgery—80 (4.5%), haematology—73 (4.11%), and heart surgery—70 (3.94%). The remaining 25.7% of referrals were to 20 other specialities.
- **Gender gap:** The gender gap in referrals continued: 54.44% male patients versus 45.56% female patients. 23.73% of all referrals were for children aged 0-17 years and 19.29% were for patients aged over 60 years.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for May 2014:** NIS 8,184,813.

Referrals reflect pressure on public health system

The Ministry of Health (MoH) in Gaza referred 1,778 patients to outside hospitals in May, the lowest number since the beginning of the year but it still 27% higher than the monthly average for 2013. The drop was seen primarily in decreased referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza (305; 17.15%) which were 35% lower than the monthly average in 2014. Referrals to East Jerusalem (615; 34.59%) were higher than the monthly average in 2014, while referrals to West Bank hospitals (321; 18.05%) were the highest since 2005. Referrals to Israel (376; 21.15%) were 10% lower than the monthly average for the first four months of 2014 (415) reflecting the MoH policy of decreasing higher cost referrals to Israel. Only one referral was issued to Jordan during May, following the 2012 halt to that destination due to accrued PA debts. Referrals to Egypt remained at below average levels (160; 9%) since July 2013, reflecting the unstable border and internal situation in Egypt prevalent since July 2013 (**Chart 1** and **Table 1**). Referrals inside Gaza were mainly for MRI (146), heart catheterization (96), rehabilitation (19), urology (10), pediatric (9), and neurology (7). The remaining 18 were to 8 different specialties.

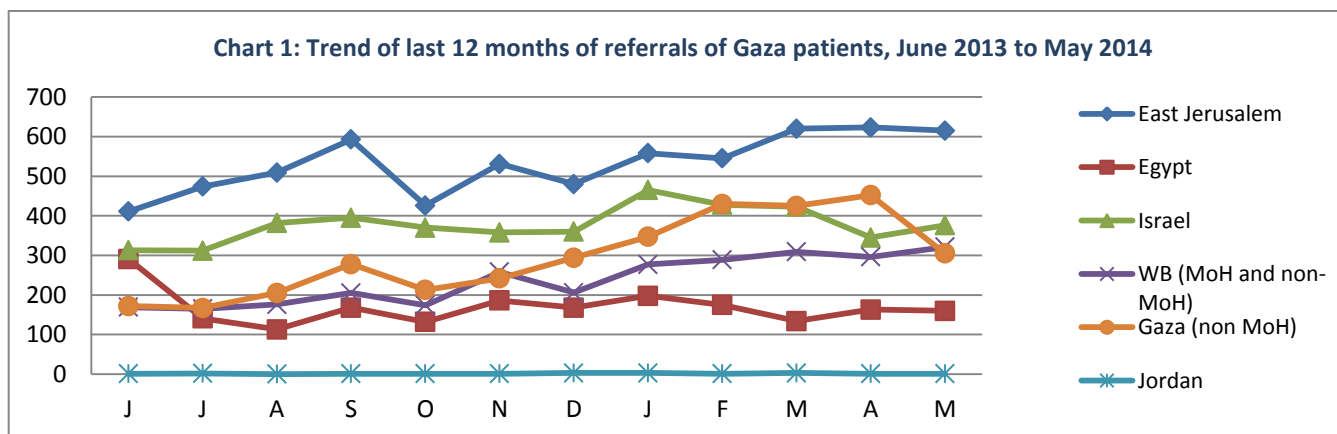


Table 1: Palestinian MoH Referrals, by destination and planned exit route January – May 2014

Referral Destination	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	Total	2013 monthly average
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	347	430	425	452	305	1,959	206
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	277	289	309	296	321	1,492	180
East Jerusalem	558	545	620	623	615	2,961	482
Jordan	3	1	3	1	1	9	1
Israel	465	428	423	345	376	2,037	306
Egypt	198	175	134	163	160	830	226
Total	1,848	1,868	1,914	1,880	1,778	9,288	1,401

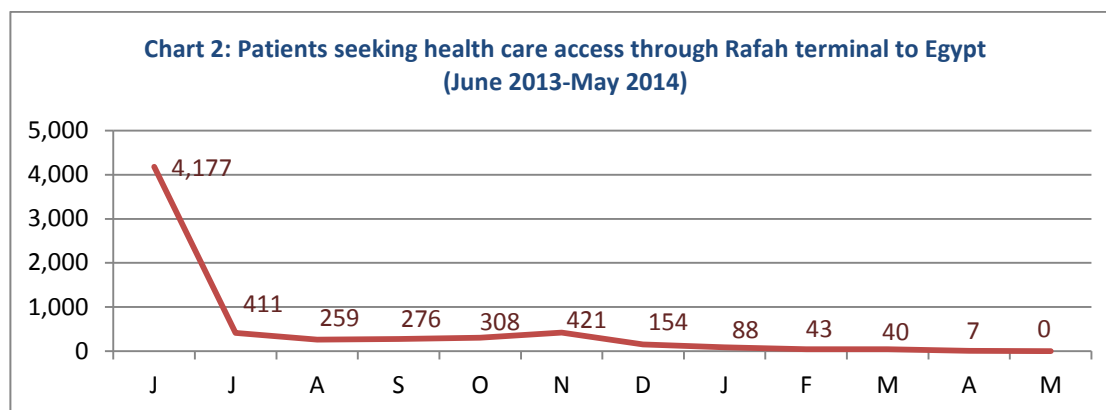
Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza

referrals approved by the Referral Abroad Department were requested by Shifa Hospital in Gaza city. Referral destinations needing coordination for exit through Erez crossing were 1,313 (74%) out of 1,778 referrals during May.

Patients' access to Egypt blocked: Rafah terminal was completely closed for humanitarian cases including patient referrals during May. The terminal was partially opened for 6 days exclusively for pilgrims with special coordination to travel through Egypt, allowing 1,738 Saudi-bound pilgrims to cross Rafah terminal during May. No patients were allowed to cross the terminal for the first time since the WHO started to monitor patient access in 2005 (**Chart 2**).

No medical delegations and only one shipment of medical aid have been able to pass through Rafah terminal since July 2013. In May 2014 two non-medical solidarity visitors crossed into the Gaza Strip, one from "Miles of Smiles" campaign and another from Algeria carrying a small amount of medical aid.

90.55% of referrals were for in-patient admissions in hospitals and 9.45% were for out-patient services. 23.73% of patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 19.29% were elderly patients over 60. Female referral patients were 45.56% of the total. 50% of all Gaza Strip



Access through Erez

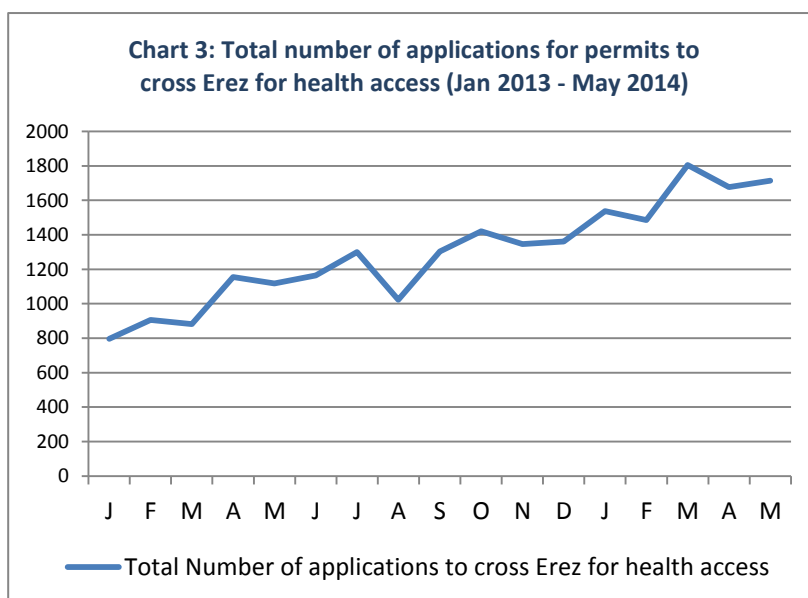
Volume: The volume of patient applications in May to cross Erez for health access was 49% higher than the monthly average in 2013, and the second highest month for referrals in 2014 after a peak of 1,806 patient applications submitted in March (Chart 3). In May 85.76% of patients' permit applications were approved, lower than the average for 2013 (88%) (Table 2). The volume of permit applications for the period from January-May this year was unprecedented, 69% higher than the same period in 2013, while the approval rate for the same period was 1.54% lower (Table 3).

Table 2: Decisions by Israeli District Liaison Office on patient permit applications to cross Erez by age, sex and GSS risk, May 2014

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called for GSS interrogation	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	69	92	65	83	0	0	4	9	0	0
4 - 17	124	173	107	155	3	2	14	16	0	0
18 - 40	229	261	192	165	1	5	36	91	2	8
41 - 60	225	250	207	225	2	1	16	24	0	2
Over 60	127	164	118	153	0	0	9	11	0	0
Sub-total	774	940	689	781	6	8	79	151	2	10
Total	1,714		1,470 (85.76%)		14 (0.82%)		230 (13.42%)		12 (0.7%)	

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Denied: 14 patients (6 females; 8 males) were denied access through Erez to specialized hospitals during May including 5 children, more than 4 times the average monthly rate of denials in 2013. The patients had been referred mainly for treatment in general surgery, oncology, orthopedics, pediatrics, ophthalmology, nuclear medicine, neurology, chest disease, dermatology and ENT. 11 of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 2 in Israel, and 1 in Jordan. 12 of the denied patients were funded by the MoH, and 2 were self-funded. 6 patients waited 8-14 days, and 4 patients waited 15- 30 days to receive the negative response on their applications.



Delayed: Patients should apply 10 days prior to their appointments and Israeli authorities should give a response to applicants within that time. According to the Palestinian District Coordination office, 230 patient applicants (151 males; 79 females), including 43 children and 20 patients over the age of 60, received no response and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 230 patients delayed, 41.74% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, 30% in West Bank hospitals, 24.35% in Israel and 3.91% in Jordan. The Ministry of Health financially covered 92% of these referrals while 6.52% were self-funded and the remaining 1.3% were funded by other organizations.

Of the patients delayed, 25% of applications (59 of 230 submitted) were submitted within 1 week prior to the scheduled appointment. Of those delayed, 39 patients were still awaiting a response after two weeks and 1 after one month. The delayed patients were mainly referred for treatments in orthopedics, ophthalmology, nuclear medicine, oncology, cardiology, hematology, neurology, and neurosurgery.

In May, according to the Palestinian coordination office data, one-third of all patients apply for permits from 1 to 6 days before their appointment, and two-thirds of patients apply one week or more before their appointments, refuting Israeli authorities' claims that most patients apply too late.

12 patients (10 males; 2 females) were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) as a condition to process their application. As of the first week of June, one had been granted a permit following the interview.

In May, 95.39% of all patients applying for Israeli permits were referrals from the Palestinian MoH, 2.74% were self-funded, and the remaining patients were funded by the Peres Center for Peace, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, Nour Al-Alam foundation, and other organizations. Patients and companions often face financial problems during long stays in hospitals due to uncovered costs such as transportation, companion costs and some patient care items such as medicines not available in the hospital supply.

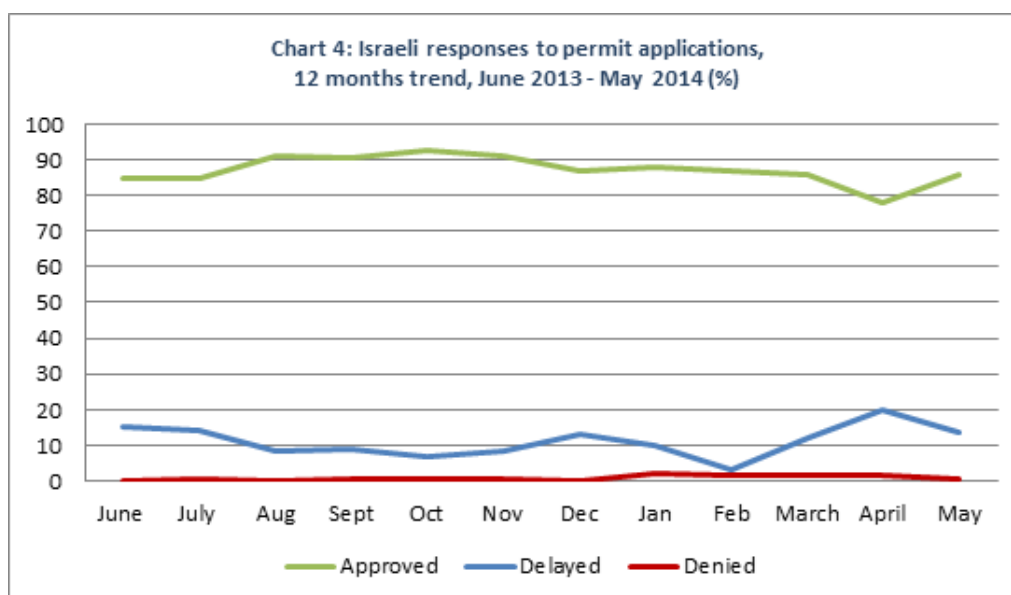


Table 3: Decisions by Israeli District Liaison Office on permit requests to cross Erez, by response, sex of applicant and comparison with corresponding periods in 2013 and 2014 (number and %)

Period	May 2013		May 2014		January-May 2013		January – May 2014	
Total	1, 117 (F:548; M:569)		1,714 (F:774; M:940)		4,857 (F:2,322; M:2,535)		8,220 (F:3,808;M:4,412)	
Approved	900 (F:461; M:439)	80.57%	1,470 (F:689; M:781)	85.76%	4,193 (F:2,055; M:2,138)	86.33%	6970 (F:3,378;M:3,592)	84.79%
Denied	1 (F:0; M:1)	0.09%	14 (F:6; M:8)	0.82%	6 (F:2; M:4)	0.12%	165 (F:57;M:108)	2%
Delayed	216 (F:87; M:129)	19.34%	230 (F:79; M:151)	13.42%	658 (F:265; M:393)	13.55%	1085 (F:373;M:712)	13.21%
-- called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	12 (F:5;M:7)	1.07%	12 (F:2; M:10)	0.7%	69 (F:18; M:51)	1.42%	80 (F:10;M:70)	0.97%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Access through exit points: Erez and Rafah

The Palestinian General Authority for Civil Affairs registered 1,318 patients and 1,279 companions travelling through Erez checkpoint to hospitals in Israel, oPt or Jordan during May; most patients had to walk through the terminal, while 91 patients were transferred via back-to-back ambulances.

The ambulance station at Rafah terminal reported that no patients were allowed to cross to Egypt during May either as regular travellers or by ambulance. This was the first complete halt in humanitarian access through Rafah since the WHO began monitoring patient access in 2005 (Table 4).

Table 4: Gaza Health Access Crossings, May 2014

Point of exit	Patient Exit	Crossing by ambulance (back-to-back transfers)	Days open in month
Erez crossing (north) via Israel)*	1,318 patients/1,279 companions	91 patients	Open 24 days; closed 7 days (5 Saturdays and 2 days for Jewish holidays)
Rafah crossing (south) to Egypt)**	ZERO	ZERO	Closed 31 days. (The terminal opened exclusively for pilgrims on 6 days with special coordination. 1,738 pilgrims crossed through Rafah terminal travelling via Cairo airport to Saudi Arabia.)

*Source: Palestinian General Authority for Civil Affairs

**Source: Emergency Medical Services of the MoH, Gaza, Rafah terminal

Patient suffers after health access denial

Mazen Sihwail, 35, a father of 6 children, from Beit Hanoun has suffered from abdominal problems since 2006 when he was admitted to Kamal Adwan hospital in North Gaza with severe pain. Exploratory surgery revealed a large tumor in the abdomen and a portion of his intestine was removed. He received follow up treatments locally in Gaza. "I was referred to Egypt in 2006, two months after the initial surgery and I stayed 60 days for surgery to close the colostomy opened in my abdominal wall during the initial surgery." The treatment cost in Egypt was very high for Mazen whose family has a very poor socio-economic situation.



Since his initial surgery Mazen has been suffering from severe stomach and abdominal pain, recurrent vomiting and gastrointestinal bleeding. Medical investigations revealed a large diaphragmatic hernia that needs surgical repair. "My treating doctor in Gaza advised me to have the surgery either in Turkey, Jerusalem or in the West Bank and to avoid having it in Egypt." Mazen received a referral from the MoH for the needed treatment in the Specialized Arab Hospital (SAH) in Nablus in the West Bank. He then applied for a permit to cross Erez three times without receiving a response. "The last time I applied I was told by the Palestinian coordination office that my permit application was approved for my appointment on November 7, 2013. I went to Erez early in the morning on that day and received my permit but I was asked to wait in the passenger hall. At 11 a.m. Israeli security men came over and arrested me. They took me for interrogation that continued until 4 p.m. After the interrogation, I was told by the security men that I will not be allowed to cross to the West Bank because my brother was involved in a military operation against Israel. Although they knew that I have nothing to do with my brother's story, they forced me to return to Gaza. Why should they issue me a permit if they would not allow me to go through!"

Mazen then applied to the referral abroad department for a change of destination to Egypt. "I traveled to Egypt on November 27, 2013, where I had medical examinations and was discharged with treatment and follow up. The pills are not really helping me and they are too expensive," Mazen reported. "I crossed again to Egypt at the end of March 2014, but had to wait 2 months to pass through Rafah terminal which was closed most of the time. Then when I arrived the Egyptian doctors were on strike. I went to a private doctor who examined me and advised me to have the surgery, but that was impossible because of the physicians' strike. I could not afford the costs for the surgery in a private hospital. When they found out we were Palestinians from Gaza both my wife who accompanied me to Egypt and myself were verbally harassed by the Egyptians. I will not return to Egypt for treatment also because I am afraid to contract hepatitis." On May 28, 2014, the MoH referred Mazen to hospital in Nablus, but his permit was denied again. "I appealed to a human rights organization in Gaza to help me travel to the West Bank for treatment. I am now waiting for a response," Mazen said.