



MONTHLY REPORT

February 2020

Health Access

Barriers for patients in the occupied Palestinian territory

 **7,627**

referrals issued to access health facilities outside the Palestinian MoH

2,613 Gaza

4,932 West Bank

 **69%**

of Gaza patient permit applications approved

51%

of Gaza companion permit applications approved

 **86%**

of West Bank patient permit applications approved

81%

of companion permit applications approved

 **2**

Gaza patients called for security interview

2
denied

IN FOCUS

COVID-19 affects health access for vulnerable Gaza patients

Part 1 Referrals

February Referrals by the Ministry of Health

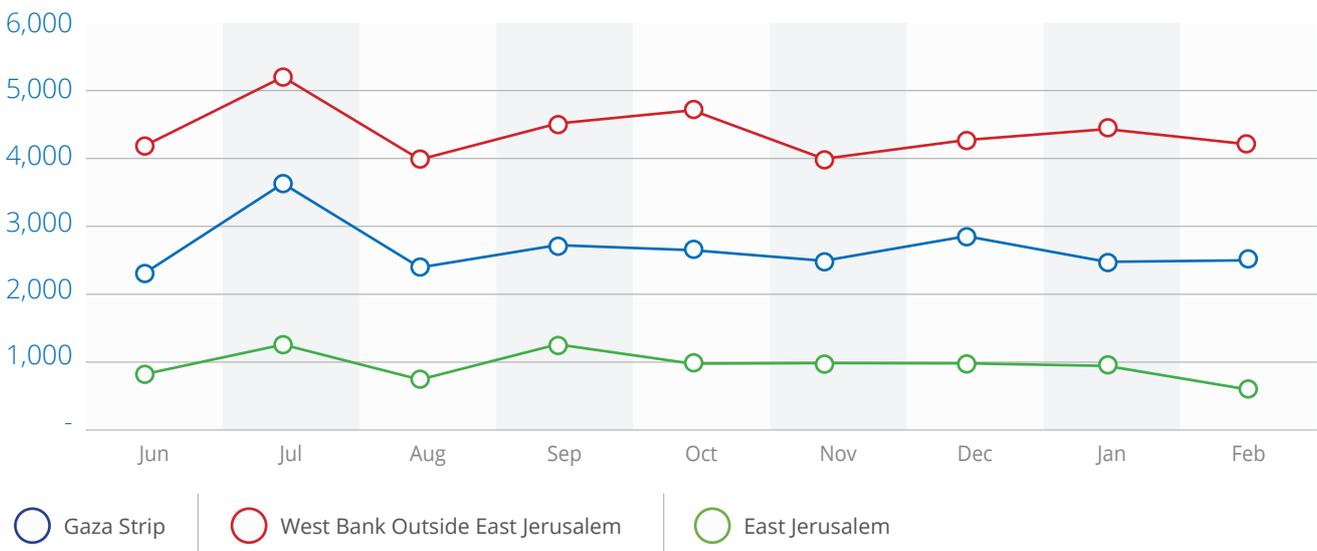
In February, the Palestinian Ministry of Health approved 7,627 referrals. 65% (4,932) of referrals were for West Bank patients, including 745 referrals for patients from East Jerusalem, while 34% (2,613) of referrals were for Gaza patients. The origin of 80 (1%) referrals was not reported while 2 patients were referred from Jordan. Female patient referrals comprised 45% of the total. Reduced referrals to Israeli hospitals persisted, with 79 referrals to Israeli hospitals from Gaza (20% of the 2018 monthly average of 389), and 331 referrals for West Bank patients (28% of the 2018 monthly average of 1,185). Referrals from Gaza to Egypt comprised 14% (363) of total Gaza referrals compared to a monthly average of 196 in the year 2018. More than three-fifths (63%) of Gaza referrals required Israeli-issued permits. In the West Bank, 45% of referrals were to facilities in East Jerusalem or Israel, the majority of which require Israeli-issued permits to access health care. Chart 1 shows the number of referral documents issued to patients by the Palestinian MoH from May 2019 to February 2020.

 **2,613**
Gaza

 **4,932**
West Bank

referrals approved financial coverage for healthcare outside the Palestinian Ministry of Health

Chart 1 Number of referrals issued by the Palestinian MoH by place of origin, June 2019 to Feb 2020



Part 2 Access

The Gaza Strip

There were 1,760 patient applications submitted to Israeli authorities to cross Erez for healthcare in February. About a third (32%) were for children under 18 and about a fifth (19%) were for patients aged 60 years or older. 46% of applications were for female patients and 92% were for medical care funded by the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

More than three-fifths (64%) of applications to cross Erez were for appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, a quarter (26%) for West Bank hospitals, 10% for Israeli hospitals and 3 applications were for patients had appointments in Jordan. More than half of applications (56%) were for appointments at Augusta Victoria Hospital (30%), and Makassed Hospital (26%), both in East Jerusalem.

The top five specialties accounted for 71% of permit applications: oncology (34%); paediatrics (10%); haematology (10%); cardiology (9%); and ophthalmology (8%). The remaining 29% were for 24 other specialties.

Approved permit applications: 1,217 (667 male; 550 female) or 69% of the 1,760 applications to cross Erez in February 2020 were approved, an increase compared to the approval rate of 65% for 2019. Chart 2 shows the trend for Israeli responses to Gaza patient permit applications over the past 12 months. A third (33%) of permits approved were for children under 18 and nearly a quarter (23%) for patients aged 60 years or older.



1,760

patients applications

to Israeli authorities to cross Erez/ Beit Hanoun to access healthcare



69%

approved



9%

denied

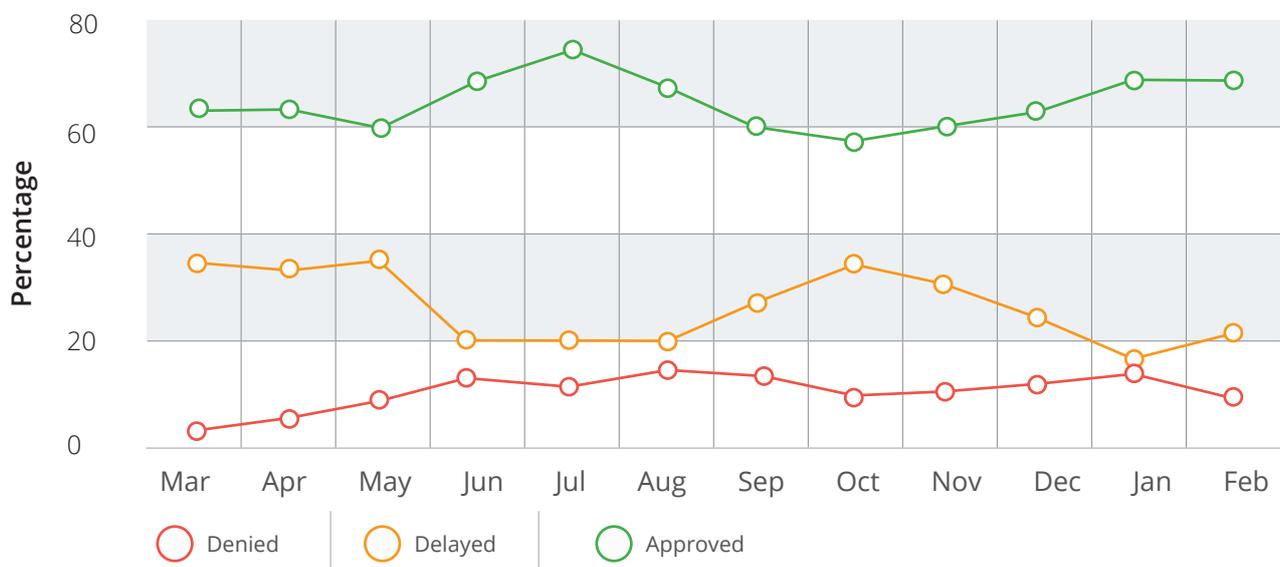


22%

delayed

Chart 2

Israeli responses to Gaza patient permit applications, March 2019 to February 2020



Denied care: 159 patient applications (90 male; 69 female), or 9% of the total, were denied permits to cross Erez to reach healthcare in February. Those denied included 22 children under 18 and 17 patients aged 60 years or older. A quarter (25%) of denied applications were for appointments for cancer care (oncology), 15% for ophthalmology, 11% for orthopaedics, 9% for cardiology, 8% for internal medicine, 7% for haematology and 5% for neurosurgery. 94% of denied permit applications were for appointments at hospitals in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and 6% were for Israeli hospitals.

Delayed care: 384 patient applications (200 male; 184 female), or 22% of the total, were delayed access to care, receiving no definitive response to their application by the date of their hospital appointment. Of these, 134 applications were for children under the age of 18 and 36 applications were for patients aged 60 years or older. Close to a third (32%) of those delayed had appointments for cancer care (oncology), 11% for paediatrics, 10% for haematology, 9% for cardiology, 7% for ophthalmology, 5% for orthopaedics and 5% for internal medicine. The remaining 21% were for 19 other specialties. The majority of delayed applications (311 or 81%) were 'under study' at the time of appointment.

Access for those injured during the Great March of Return

As of 29 February 2020, according to Gaza's Coordination and Liaison Office, there had been 606 patient applications to Israeli authorities for permits to access healthcare through Erez/Beit Hanoun crossing by those injured during the Great March of Return demonstrations, since 30 March 2018. The number is unchanged since 31 January 2020, with no permit applications for those injured in demonstrations during February. The approval rate for this group is significantly lower than the overall approval rate for patient permit applications to exit Gaza, with 17% (105) approved, 28% (167) denied and 55% (334) delayed.

Security interrogation

In February, two male patients aged 53 and 47 year were called for security interrogation as a prerequisite to processing of their permit applications. Both were referred to St John's Eye Hospital in East Jerusalem for ophthalmology. Both patients were denied permits.

Patient companions

In February, there were 2,037 companion permit applications to Israeli authorities to cross Erez to accompany patients. These applications include parents or other companions applying to accompany children. Only one companion is allowed to accompany each Gaza patient. In February 1,030 companion permit applications (51% of the total) were approved, 272 applications (13%) were denied and the remaining 735 (36%) were delayed, receiving no definitive response by the time of the patient's appointment. Chart 3 shows the trend for Israeli responses to patient companion applications over the last 12 months.



2

patients called for security interrogation

2 denied



2,037

patient companion applications

to Israeli authorities to cross Erez to accompany patients

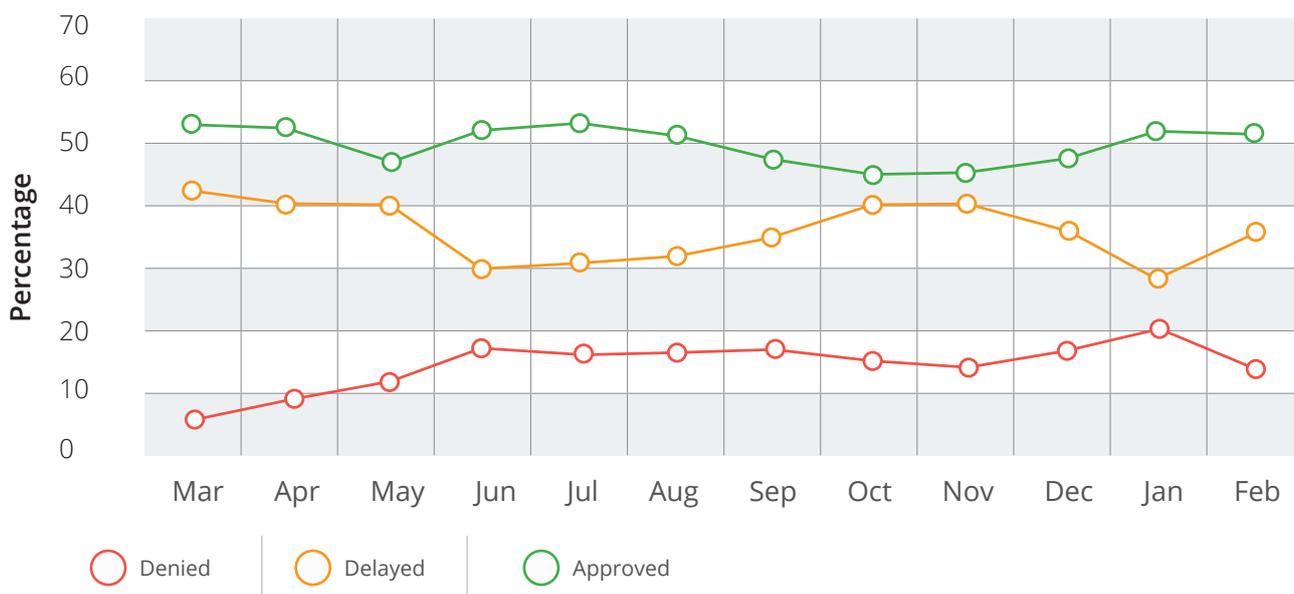
51% approved

13% denied

36% delayed

Chart 3

Israeli responses to Gaza companion applications , March 2019 to February 2020



Patients and companions crossing Erez

The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,636 Gaza patients and 1,342 companions crossed Erez in February to access hospitals outside the Gaza Strip. Of these, 72 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulance with 71 companions. During the month, Erez crossing was open for 24 days for daytime working hours and closed on 5 days (5 Saturdays).



1,636

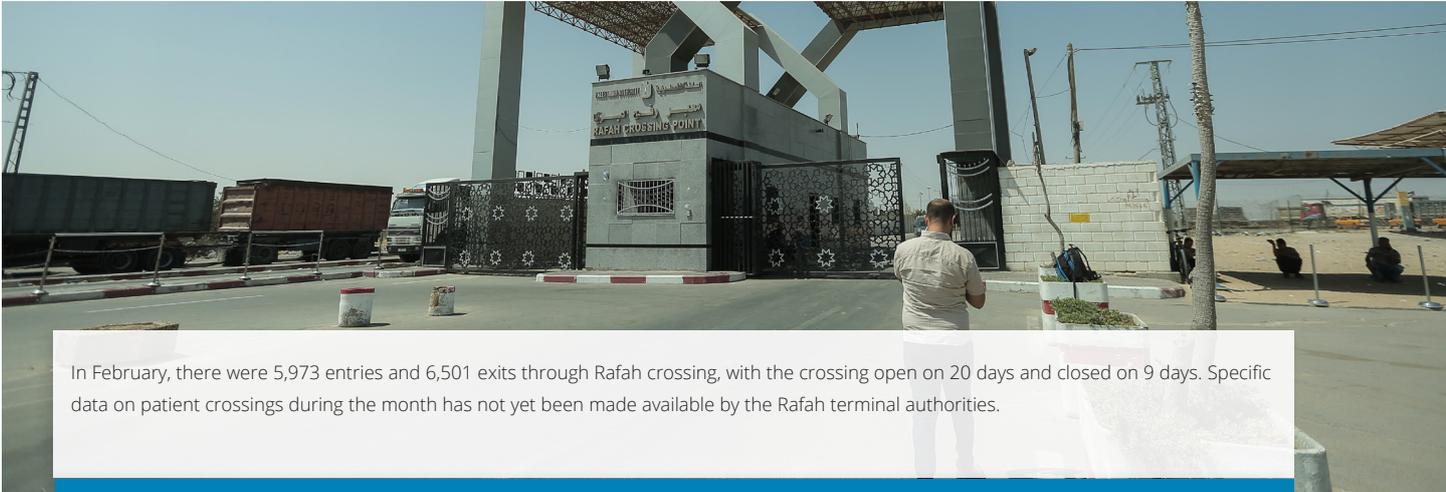
patients crossed Erez for healthcare



1,342

patient companions crossed Erez

Rafah crossing – Egypt



In February, there were 5,973 entries and 6,501 exits through Rafah crossing, with the crossing open on 20 days and closed on 9 days. Specific data on patient crossings during the month has not yet been made available by the Rafah terminal authorities.

The West Bank

In February, there were 7,197 applications by West Bank patients to the Israeli authorities to access healthcare in East Jerusalem and Israel. Restrictions on the movement of Palestinians from the West Bank to Israel and East Jerusalem are less severe for certain sections of the population. Many women older than 50 years of age and men older than 55 years of age, as well as children under 13 years traveling with an approved adult, are exempted from the requirement to obtain a permit to travel – provided they are not traveling on a Saturday, before 8am or after 7pm. Of West Bank patient applications, 6,172 (86%) were approved, 691 (10%) were unsuccessful and 334 (5%) were pending reply at the time of monthly reporting. Of the 7,941 patient companion applications, 6,440 (81%) were approved, 1,095 (14%) were unsuccessful and 406 (5%) were pending reply at the time of monthly reporting.

 **7,197**
patient
applications

for Israeli permits to access
healthcare in East Jerusalem
and Israel

 **86% approved**

 **10% unsuccessful**

 **5% pending**
at the time of monthly
reporting

 **7,941**
patient companion
applications

to access healthcare in East
Jerusalem and Israel

 **81% approved**

 **14% unsuccessful**

 **5% pending**
at the time of monthly
reporting

In Focus

COVID-19 affects health access for Gaza patients.

Itidal, a 42-year-old woman from Deir al-Balah in the Middle Area of the Gaza Strip, has been living with breast cancer since February 2017.

Due to lack of availability in the Gaza Strip, Itidal has been traveling out of Gaza to Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem to receive the specialist drug Herceptin, which is known to substantially improve outcomes for specific types of breast tumour. Like all patients needing healthcare outside the Gaza Strip in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, Itidal has had to apply for Israeli-issued permits to exit. Since her diagnosis she has made eight such applications for appointments at Augusta Victoria Hospital. Five applications were approved on time for her to travel for care, while three were delayed, with Itidal receiving no definitive response to her applications by the time of her hospital appointment. In 2019, 35% of all 24,316 patient permit applications made during the year were unsuccessful (2,146 or 9% denied and 6,364 or 26% delayed, with the remainder approved).



Itidal's latest appointment was approved for her to attend an appointment in East Jerusalem on 16 March 2020, after her two previous applications had been unsuccessful. Itidal discusses her uncertainty about procedures for access in the context of COVID-19: "Despite my fear and confusion from the new situation of coronavirus, I persisted to apply because I felt that if I don't get the treatment my health will just deteriorate. I'm also supposed to take tamoxifen once a day but unfortunately I haven't taken the drug for more than a week now since it ran out. I needed to be referred to refill for another three months."

Itidal was fearful about her own susceptibility to the virus, and took precautions to reduce her risk of exposure: "Because I have cancer, my immune system is weak. I know that my risk is high but I have no other options than to travel. I tried to avoid talking to people. I stayed far away from gatherings and I took a private car from the crossing to the hospital in order to stay away from crowds." She discussed the journey out across Erez: "A medical committee decided if referral was strictly necessary. They gave us sanitary advice and instructions on preventing coronavirus spread. There weren't any new measures on the Israeli side, but when we reached the hospital they required us to go through sanitary measures and assessed the temperature for each of us. Then I received my treatment as usual."

On returning to Gaza the next day, Itidal and other patients underwent assessments on arrival. After this, they signed declarations to self-quarantine for 14 days before being taken to quarantine facilities in a local school: "Each class has five to ten people... The school is open and it's cold here. If I had to self-quarantine, my home is equipped. When I caught flu at home it took me a month to recover. What would I do if it happened to me here?"

Each week a committee in Gaza reviews its policies for isolation and quarantine of persons returning from outside the Gaza Strip. With the lack of access to clean water and sanitation, crowded conditions and existing strain on health facilities there are understandably high levels of fear about the arrival of COVID-19 cases. Meanwhile, the health system is stepping up preparedness efforts. Two cases of COVID-19 were confirmed on 21 March, with both persons in quarantine after returning from outside the Gaza Strip.

Itidal, a mother of five children and maths teacher, wonders why the drugs she needs cannot instead be shipped into Gaza. Indeed, she received her first three doses of Herceptin when the drug was available at the European Gaza Hospital in Khan Younis. "As patients, why should we suffer to receive treatment? I appeal to the authorities to provide the drugs we need in Gaza at this difficult time. That will eliminate needless suffering of cancer patients, support our efforts and reduce costs."