

MONTHLY REPORT

April 2020



Health Access

Barriers for patients in the occupied Palestinian territory

 **4,125**

referrals issued to access health facilities outside the Palestinian MoH

1,011 Gaza

3,069 West Bank

 **71%**

of Gaza patient permit applications approved

54%

of Gaza companion permit applications approved

 **70%**

of West Bank patient permit applications approved

68%

of companion permit applications approved

 **0**

Gaza patients called for security interview

IN FOCUS

Patients in Gaza denied access to essential healthcare during COVID - 19

Part 1 Referrals

April Referrals by the Ministry of Health

In April, the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 4,125 referrals to non-MoH facilities, a significant reduction (46%) from an average of 7,665 referrals per month in the first quarter this year. By the end of March, the MoH had restricted referrals to urgent cases only, to limit physical interactions and preserve health resources in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. For April, 74% (3,069) of referrals were for West Bank patients, including 381 referrals for patients from East Jerusalem, with 25% (1,011) for Gaza patients. The origin of 45 (1%) referrals was not reported.

In the Gaza Strip, there was a significant increase in the proportion of referrals locally within Gaza, from 21% in the first quarter to 55% in April. Similarly in the West Bank, the proportion of referrals locally within the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) increased from 52% in the first quarter to 61% in April. Referrals to East Jerusalem from the Gaza Strip declined from 43% to 32% in the same periods, while Gaza referrals to the West Bank declined from 14% to 7%. West Bank referrals to East Jerusalem also declined, from 40% in the first quarter to 35% in April. Referrals to Egypt dropped from 6% to 1% in the same period, while referrals to Israel remained relatively constant (5% to 4%). 41% of Gaza referrals required Israeli-issued permits compared to 65% in January and February, while in the West Bank 39% of referrals were to facilities in East Jerusalem or Israel, compared to an average of 48% for January and February, the majority of which need Israeli permits.

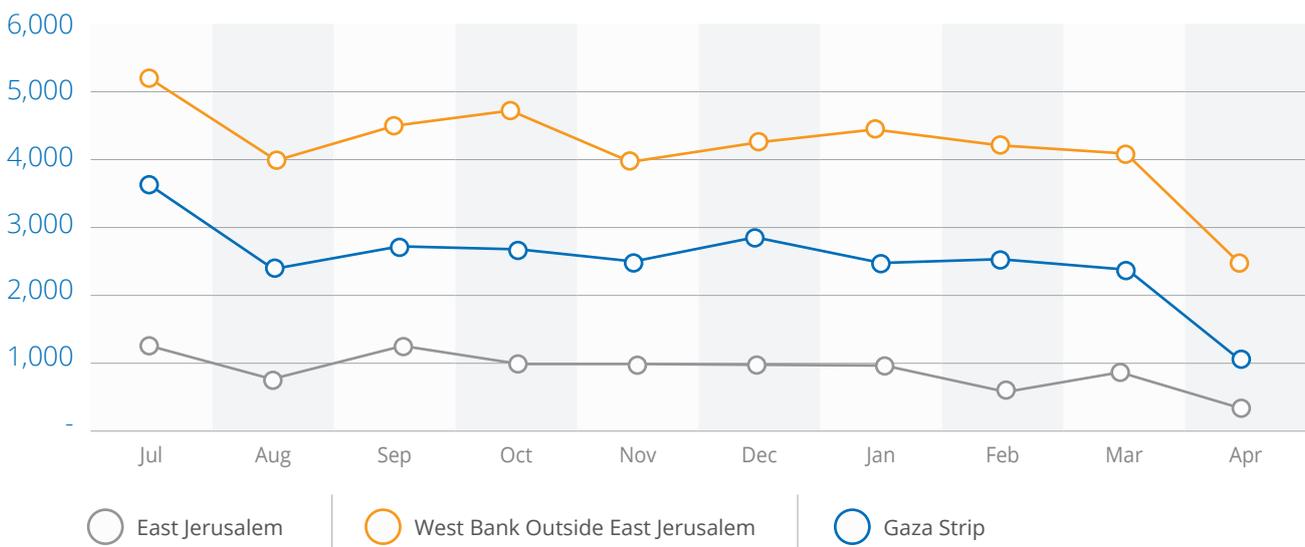
12% of referrals were for patients under 20-year-old and 33% were for those aged 60 years or older, while 46% of referrals for female patients.

 **1,011**
Gaza

 **3,069**
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, July 2019 to April 2020



Part 2 Access

The Gaza Strip

The number of permit applications to exit the Gaza Strip sharply declined to 159 in April, the lowest recorded since April 2009. This was a further reduction after the substantial decline to 1,279 in March from a monthly average of 1,777 in January and February, in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak in Israel and the West Bank. Despite the low numbers applying due to restricted eligibility during this period, more than a quarter of patient applications were unsuccessful with a patient approval rate of just 71% compared to 66% in the first quarter of 2020.

The reduced number of patient permit applications reflected restrictions in the eligibility criteria for patients to access referrals during this period. Other factors, including patient fears about traveling out of Gaza and the deterrent of quarantine for all those returning after travel, including for patients, may also have contributed to reduced applications.

Palestinian Ministry of Health policies committed to maintaining access for patients requiring urgent referral, including cancer patients requiring time-dependent treatments and investigations. In April, two-thirds of patients (65%) were for cancer care. Other specialties included haematology (16%); cardiology (5%); neurosurgery (3%); and paediatrics (3%). The remaining 8% were for 8 other specialties. Close to three-quarters (73%) of applications were for appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, 14% for West Bank hospitals, and 13% for Israeli hospitals.

A fifth (20%) of applications in April were for children under 18 and a fifth (18%) for patients aged 60 years or older. 47% of applications were for female patients and 95% were for medical care funded by the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

Approved permit applications:

113 (57 male; 56 female) or 71% of the 159 applications to cross Erez in April 2020 were approved, compared to 66% for the first quarter of the year. Chart 2 shows the trend for Israeli responses to Gaza patient permit applications over the past 12 months. More than a fifth (22%) of approved permits were for children under 18 and a fifth (19%) were for patients aged 60 years or older.

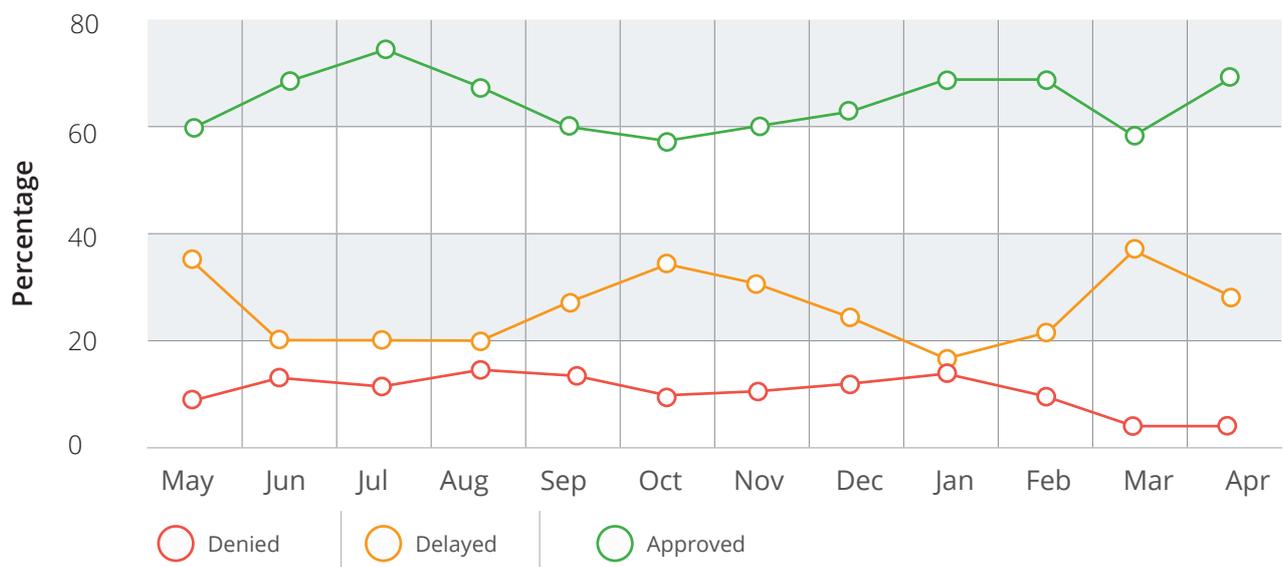
159 patients applications
to Israeli authorities to cross Erez/Beit Hanoun to access healthcare

71% approved

5% denied

24% delayed

Chart 2 Israeli responses to Gaza patient permit applications, May 2019 to April 2020



Denied care:

8 patient applications (5 male; 3 female), or 5% of the total, were denied permits to cross Erez to reach healthcare in April. Those denied included 1 child under 18. 7 of the denied applications were for appointments in Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem for cancer care (oncology) while 1 patient had an appointment for haematology at Istishari Hospital in Ramallah.

Delayed care:

38 patient applications (22 male; 16 female), or 24% of the total, were delayed access to care, receiving no definitive response to their application by the date of their hospital appointment. Of these, 6 applications (16%) were for children under the age of 18 and 7 applications (18%) were for patients aged 60 years or older. More than two-thirds (68%) of those delayed had appointments for cancer care (oncology) and 21% for haematology. The remaining 11% were for 4 other specialties. Of the 38 delayed applications, 34 (89%) were 'under study' at the time of appointment.

Patient companions

There were 176 companion permit applications to Israeli authorities to cross Erez to accompany patients in April. These applications include parents or other companions applying to accompany children. Only one companion is allowed to accompany each Gaza patient. In April, 95 companion permit applications (54% of the total) were approved, 10 applications (6%) were denied and the remaining 71 (40%) 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.



0
patients called for security
interrogation



176 patient
companion
applications

to Israeli authorities to cross
Erez to accompany patients



54% approved



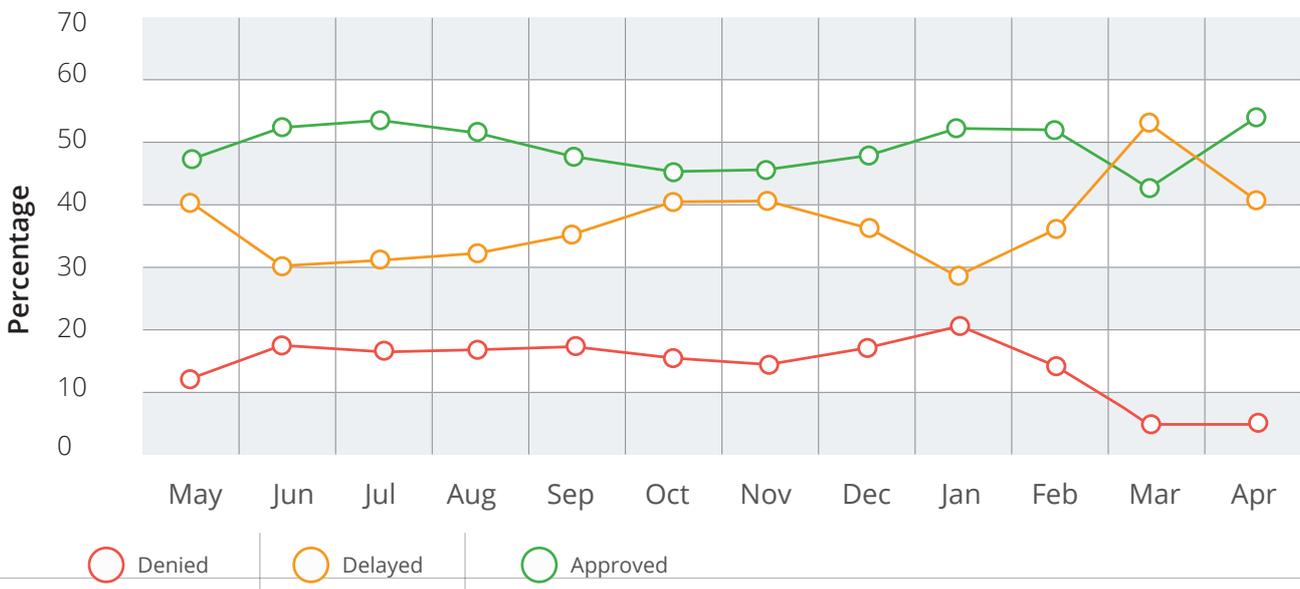
6% denied



40% delayed

Chart 3

Israeli responses to Gaza companion applications , May 2019 to April 2020



Patients and companions crossing Erez

The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 120 Gaza patients and 82 companions crossed Erez in April to access hospitals outside the Gaza Strip. Of these, 14 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulance with 10 companions. During the month, Erez crossing was open for 24 days for daytime working hours and closed on 6 days (4 Saturdays and 2 days for official Israeli holidays).

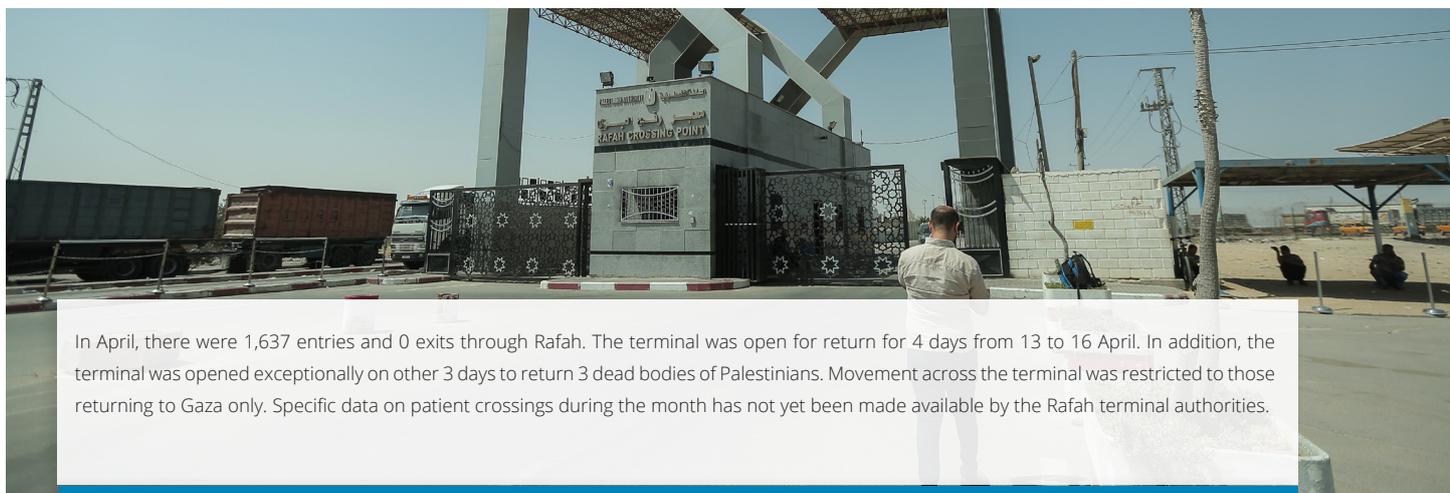


120
patients
crossed Erez for healthcare



82
patient companions
crossed Erez

Rafah crossing – Egypt



In April, there were 1,637 entries and 0 exits through Rafah. The terminal was open for return for 4 days from 13 to 16 April. In addition, the terminal was opened exceptionally on other 3 days to return 3 dead bodies of Palestinians. Movement across the terminal was restricted to those returning to Gaza only. Specific data on patient crossings during the month has not yet been made available by the Rafah terminal authorities.

The West Bank

In April, there were 771 applications by West Bank patients to the Israeli authorities to access healthcare in East Jerusalem and Israel. This shows a sharp drop of around 90% in the number of applications for patients compared to 7,480 on average for January and February. The approval rate for West Bank patients has declined, from an average of 86% for January and February to 77% in March to 70% in April. There was a similar pattern for patient companions applications, which declined by 91% from 727 applications in April from an average of 8,287 in January and February. The approval rate fell to 68% from 71% in March and an average 81% in January and February.

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, 538 (70%) were approved, 170 (22%) were unsuccessful and 63 (8%) were pending reply at the time of monthly reporting. Of the 727 patient companion applications, 497 (68%) were approved, 152 (21%) were unsuccessful and 78 (11%) were pending reply at the time of monthly reporting.

 **771** patient applications

for Israeli permits to access healthcare in East Jerusalem and Israel

 **70% approved**

 **22% unsuccessful**

 **8% pending**
at the time of monthly reporting

 **727** patient companion applications

to access healthcare in East Jerusalem and Israel

 **68% approved**

 **21% unsuccessful**

 **11% pending**
at the time of monthly reporting

In Focus

Patients in Gaza denied access to essential healthcare during COVID-19

Mohammed, 37

In February 2020 Mohammed, 37 years old from Gaza City, was diagnosed with a brain tumour after he was taken to hospital with left-sided weakness. He had surgery to remove the tumour on 23 February at Shifa Hospital in Gaza, staying two weeks in hospital.

Mohammed needed radiotherapy after his surgery, for which he was referred to Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem for an appointment on 20 April. The Palestinian Ministry of Health policies on maintaining access to essential health services incorporate all referrals for treatments and investigations needed on a timely basis, without which the patient's health may be detrimentally affected. Access to radiotherapy is an essential treatment for cancer patients, shown to improve outcomes, including survival.

To access services in East Jerusalem from the Gaza Strip, Mohammed had to apply for an Israeli-issued permit. His application for the appointment on 20 April was denied by Israeli authorities, so the Palestinian Ministry of Health arranged a further appointment for treatment on 4 May. On his second application, Mohammed received no response by the date of his appointment, further delaying his access to essential healthcare.

Because of restricted provision of essential services in the context of COVID-19, Israeli authorities had a mere 159 applications to process in the course of April 2020, compared to an average 1,777 monthly applications for the first two months of the year, before the spread of COVID-19 in the West Bank and Israel.

Mohammed is married and has five children. The eldest is 9 years old and the youngest 9 months. Before he fell ill he worked driving a rickshaw ("tuk-tuk") making goods deliveries. Since his illness, Mohammed and his family depend on his extended family for support.

On 13 May, Mohammed was admitted to Rantisi Hospital in Gaza City with worsening of his symptoms. Tests showed swelling around his brain causing raised pressure inside his head. He commented, "The doctors expect my health to deteriorate if I can't access radiotherapy. I need it urgently. I'm currently staying in hospital being treated with drugs to lower the pressure on my brain and control the seizures I've been having. I'm still waiting for the [latest] permit [application] to be approved."

Mohammed received a response to the third and latest of his applications for access to the treatment he urgently needs on 19 May. His application was again denied.



Abdullah, 24

Abdullah, a 24-year-old university student from Gaza, was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin lymphoma in September 2019. He received six cycles of chemotherapy at Rantisi Hospital in Gaza City. After his treatment, doctors requested his referral to Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem for further evaluation and investigation, including for a PET scan that is not available in the Gaza Strip.

Abdullah submitted a permit application for an appointment on 10 February 2020 with his mother, Sondos, to accompany him. However, his permit application was delayed by Israeli authorities, with no approval by the date of his appointment. He was requested to reapply with an updated medical report. Abdullah did this, and applied with his renewed medical report for an appointment on 20 April. On this second occasion his permit application was denied.

Abdullah commented, "They instructed me to renew all the required papers for the referral. I did this so I have no idea why they denied me."

Abdullah sees his doctor in Rantisi Hospital every three weeks. Now he has to reapply and go through the same process, in the face of uncertainty. He said, "I feel so stressed and I worry about my health. I hope to receive the PET scan so I can get the treatment I need. The scan can tell me if I'm clear and then I wouldn't need more chemotherapy treatment."