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Israel: Record-Low in Gaza Medical Permits 54 Died in 2017 Awaiting Israeli Permit

(Jerusalem, February 13, 2018) – The record-low rate of permits issued by [Israel](#) for [Palestinians](#) seeking vital medical treatment outside Gaza underlines the urgent need for Israel to end its decade-long closure of the Gaza Strip, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP), and Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI) said today in a joint statement. Record-high delays by the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 2017 in issuing required approvals and Egypt's continued closure of the Rafah border crossing with Gaza have further restricted movement and caused additional suffering.

Israeli authorities approved permits for medical appointments for only 54 percent of those who applied in 2017, the [lowest rate](#) since the World Health Organization (WHO) began collecting [figures](#) in 2008. WHO reported that 54 Palestinians, 46 of whom had cancer, died in 2017 following denial or delay of their permits.

“We’re seeing Israel increasingly deny or delay access to potentially life-saving cancer and other treatment outside Gaza, with shockingly high numbers of Palestinian patients subsequently dying, while Gaza’s healthcare system – subjected to half a century of occupation and a decade of blockade – is decreasingly able to meet the needs of its population,” said Aimee Shalan, CEO of MAP.

Israel should lift the [unlawful](#) sweeping restrictions on the freedom of movement of people from Gaza, most critically those with significant health problems, the organizations said.

For the last two decades, and especially since 2007 when Israel imposed a land, air, and sea blockade on Gaza, [Israel has kept Gaza mostly closed](#), unlawfully [depriving](#) its population of basic rights. The United Nations and the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) (ICRC), among others, have declared this policy “collective punishment” and called for Israel to lift its closure. Israel controls all Gaza access, with the exception of the Rafah crossing via the Egyptian border, and all crossings between Gaza and the West Bank, including the border between the West Bank and Jordan. The Israeli authorities do not allow Palestinians in Gaza to reopen their airport or build a seaport, leaving Palestinians dependent on foreign ports for travel abroad.

Travel through the Erez Crossing, Gaza’s passenger crossing to Israel, the West Bank, and the outside world, is limited to what the Israeli military calls “exceptional humanitarian cases,” meaning mainly those with significant health issues and their companions, and prominent businesspeople. The gradual decline in Israel’s issuance of medical permits, from 92 percent approval of applications in 2012 to 88.7 percent in 2013, 82.4 percent in 2014, 77.5 percent in 2015, 62.07 percent in 2016, and 54 percent in 2017 according to the [WHO](#), indicates that Israel has increasingly restricted travel even for “exceptional humanitarian cases.” In 2017, travel via Erez was less than 1 percent of the travel recorded in September 2000.

Palestinians from Gaza missed at least 11,000 scheduled medical appointments after Israeli authorities denied or failed to respond in time to applications for permits. [Research](#) by Al Mezan, supported by MAP, into the cases of 20 Palestinians who died after missing hospital appointments due to denied or delayed travel permits found that 14 had cancer, nine of whom were women. PHRI has [highlighted](#) how women in Gaza with cancer have faced heightened obstacles to accessing medical care and consequently spent energy fighting bureaucracy rather than their illness.

The significant decline runs counter to the ever-increasing health needs in Gaza. Gaza's 2 million people endure what the UN labels "[a protracted humanitarian crisis](#)." Amid widespread poverty and unemployment, at least 10 percent of young children are stunted by chronic [malnutrition](#), up to half of all medicines and medical items in Gaza are completely depleted or below one month's supply, and chronic electricity shortages have caused officials to cut health and other essential services.

The [three Israeli military offensives](#) on Gaza since 2008 have also taken a heavy toll on essential infrastructure and further debilitated Gaza's health system and economy. In light of the control Israel effectively exercises over the lives and welfare of the people of Gaza, Israel continues to maintain ultimate responsibility to ensure their well-being under the law of occupation, as the ICRC and UN, among others, have recognized.

"It's unconscionable that Israel prevented so many critically ill people from accessing care that might have saved their lives," said [Sarah Leah Whitson](#), Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Israel's continued control over movement into and out of Gaza creates obligations to facilitate – not thwart – humanitarian access."

Palestinians in Gaza require referral permits to access the more advanced health care in East Jerusalem and elsewhere in the West Bank, as well as in Israel. The health services most commonly requiring referral out of Gaza are for oncology, paediatrics, cardiology and heart problems, and haematology. The Israeli authorities state that they can process priority permits in one day, although the typical waiting time averages two weeks, while "regular" cases require 23 days, and often fail to meet this timetable.

WHO has deemed the ensuing process "[neither transparent nor timely](#)," and the UN coordinator for humanitarian aid and development activities in the occupied Palestinian territory has [stated](#) that a "minefield of interviews, paperwork, opaque procedures, and logistical hurdles stand between a cancer patient and his or her urgent treatment."

The Palestinian Authority's financial approval of referrals for those in need of essential medical treatment in Gaza also fell in 2017, [with at least one subsequent death reported](#). While the PA approved about 2,000 applications in each of the first three months, this fell to under 500 in June, before increasing to more than 2,000 later in the year amid efforts at Fatah-Hamas reconciliation, according to [WHO](#). Additionally, the Palestinian authorities' [reduction](#) of essential services to the Gaza Strip between July and December 2017 – including electricity and medical supplies – also undermined Palestinians' right to health.

Egypt has kept the Rafah crossing mostly closed for the population in Gaza since 2013, which contributed to restricting access to health care. Before July 2013, [more than 4,000 Palestinians](#) traveled monthly via Rafah crossing for health-related reasons. As a state bordering a territory with a protracted humanitarian crisis, Egypt should facilitate humanitarian access for the population. Nevertheless, ultimate responsibility remains with Israel, the occupying power.

"The Israeli government's restrictions on movement are directly connected to patient deaths and compounded suffering as ill patients seek permits. These practices form part of the closure and permit regime that prevents patients from a life of dignity, and violates the right to life," Issam Younis, director of Al Mezan, said. "The closure system must be abolished so that patients have safe access to healthcare in

Palestinian hospitals in the occupied Palestinian territories and elsewhere. The victims and their families must have their right to justice and redress upheld.”

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