



OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS

**Situation Report Rafah Terminal
19 January 2005**

Rafah Terminal, located on the Egyptian/Gaza Strip border, has been closed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) since 12 December 2004. This closure came in the immediate aftermath of an attack in the terminal area by Palestinian militants that killed five Israeli soldiers and injured five. Since then, there have been additional militant attacks in the Gaza Strip¹. The IDF has also carried out a number of military operations in the territory².

The IDF has stated that building work continues on the terminal, which was extensively damaged during the 12 December attack, and it will not reopen for at least another six weeks.

The terminal is effectively the only access point for Gaza Strip residents to areas outside the Gaza Strip. It has now been closed for 39 consecutive days, by far the longest period of uninterrupted closure in the last four years of the Intifada. Between 18 July and 5 August 2004, Rafah Terminal was closed for 19 consecutive days. This closure attracted widespread international attention because of the deteriorating humanitarian situation faced by as many as 2,500 people stuck south of the border.

While the number of Palestinians waiting at the southern side of the terminal is now not more than 30, the restrictions placed on the terminal detrimentally affect a far greater number. Rafah Terminal is the only exit and entry point for the overwhelming majority of Gaza residents, so in effect more than 1.4 million people have not been able to leave the Gaza Strip.

The Current Situation

On 13 January, 300 Palestinians were at the terminal on the Egyptian side of the border waiting to re-enter the Gaza Strip³. An additional 7,000 persons were said to be waiting in towns and cities elsewhere, including outside of Egypt. Basic humanitarian needs were being met at the terminal and the Egyptian Red Crescent Society has established a medical point for health needs.

By Monday, 17 January an Egyptian official said that only 30 persons remained at the terminal, the other 270 people had been given the necessary visas that allowed them to move away from the terminal area, where they were originally confined by Egyptian authorities. An Egyptian officer also confirmed the earlier statements from the Rafah DCL that the Palestinian Authority (PA) Embassy in Cairo was making weekly payments of 150 Egyptian pounds (\$25) to Palestinians stuck at the terminal and 100 Egyptian pounds (\$17) to those elsewhere now reliant on assistance.

Due to the closure, there are pressing humanitarian needs.

¹ For more information, please see the IDF website at [<http://www1.idf.il/DOVER/site/homepage>.]

² For more information, please see "OCHA December Humanitarian Update" at [www.ochaopt.org]

³ According to the Palestinian District Coordination and Liaison Office (DCL), which monitors Rafah Terminal

Medical Patients

There has always been a need to refer critical and emergency patients from the Gaza Strip to elsewhere for more specialised treatment. Patients have usually been transferred to Israel given its geographical proximity and skilled specialists. This arrangement between the Palestinian and Israeli Ministries of Health continued after the Intifada began in September 2000 - although at a reduced rate.

Following four separate suicide attacks at Erez crossing point during the first four months of 2004, additional security measures were introduced by the Israelis that led to an increasing number of medical referrals to Egypt via Rafah Terminal. Rafah Terminal has become increasingly important during the last four years, as passage through Erez Terminal in the northern Gaza Strip, which allows for access to third countries, has become impossible for all but the most senior PA figures.

The World Health Organization (WHO) in a July 2004 report, estimated that on average 60 patients a day crossed Rafah Terminal in either direction.

Since Israel closed Rafah Terminal, 12 December 2004, WHO says that no patients have passed through the terminal, and the number of those leaving through Erez to access treatment in Israel has dropped from an average of 30 persons to 10 daily. WHO also reports that since 14 January only four patients have left via Erez and no requests for coordination to the IDF to pass have been approved.

A limited number of patients are receiving the specialist care they require. The condition of people in need of medical care can be expected, without additional intervention, to deteriorate as the closure continues.

Pilgrims

The IDF facilitated alternative passage out of the Gaza Strip for as many as 4,500 pilgrims wishing to attend the *Hajj* in Mecca. This involved the pilgrims being bused through Erez Terminal to the Kerem Shalom crossing near the Israeli border and continuing down the Philadelphia Corridor before entering the Egyptian side of Rafah Terminal. In agreements with the Egyptians and the PA, the IDF has guaranteed their return to the Gaza Strip following the *Eid Al-Adha* Islamic Feast.

At the same time, the IDF has proposed the use of Netzana (Al-Ouja) as an alternative crossing point for passengers. Such an offer was made to the PA during last summer's closure and was rejected then as it has been rejected now. Palestinian passengers entering Netzana located 50 kilometres from Rafah Terminal would have to travel by bus through Israel and enter Gaza via the Sufa Terminal (see map). This route would add approximately 80 kilometres to a single journey. Furthermore, the PA believes that no more than 200 passengers could be processed a day. There is also fear by the PA that the acceptance of such an offer in the short term may encourage the Israelis to keep Rafah Terminal permanently closed.

Passengers and Cargo

Rafah Terminal, which includes a passenger and cargo terminal, was closed for a total of 83 days in 2004, according to Al-Mezan Centre for Human Rights. Prior to September 2000, the passenger and cargo terminals were operational 24 hours a day and allowed for movement in both directions. Now, the passenger terminal is officially open from 8am to 6pm. The cargo terminal closes one hour earlier. Since 2000, no exports have left the Gaza Strip through Rafah Terminal; the commercial traffic is solely comprised of imports.

The Israeli Airport Authority (IAA), which manages the terminals, say in 2000, a total of 441,555 passengers were processed through Rafah Terminal, averaging more than 1,200 persons a day. In

2003, the last full year for which figures are available, the number was 259,386 an average of 700 passengers per day.

The Palestinian Ministry of National Economy reports that prior to 2000, 40 truckloads of imports were processed through the crossing daily. Currently, a maximum of five trucks are now permitted to cross daily into the Gaza Strip when the commercial passage is open. As at Karni and Sufa Terminals, and Tuffah, Siafa and Al-Maani checkpoints all commercial goods are transferred using the “back-to-back” method⁴, a time-consuming and costly process which often leads to spoiled merchandise.

Age and Gender Restrictions

Since January 2003, the Israeli authorities have imposed age and gender restrictions on the passage of Palestinians through Rafah Terminal. When imposed, age restrictions typically include a ban on movement out of the Gaza Strip for individuals between the ages of 16 and 35 and are usually applied to men. Restrictions were placed on the movement of Palestinian males in this age group between 1 January 2003 and 3 March 2003, according to the Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights. The restrictions were then reimposed on 15 March 2003 until 30 June 2003 following the declaration of the *hudna* or Palestinian ceasefire.

Following the assassination of Hamas leader, Dr Abdul Azziz Al Rantissi on 17 April 2004, Rafah Terminal was closed for both Palestinian males and females aged 16 to 35 years. The age restrictions on women were lifted on 16 May but have remained in place for men, with a number of limited exceptions. The IDF stated that Palestinian males in this age group were allowed to resume travel after the three-week closure that ended in August 2004. However, travel was only possible with prior coordination with the IDF and according to the Palestinian Ministry of Civil Affairs rarely exceeded 50 persons per day.

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) estimate that 480,278 Gazans are between the ages of 15 and 34. When age restrictions are strictly imposed, they directly impact approximately 33% of the population. The restrictions apply to patients, students, business people and those simply wishing to visit family members outside the Gaza Strip.

Rafah Terminal Background

Rafah Terminal moved to its current location in 1982, following the closure of the Neot Sinai Terminal in accordance with the peace treaty with Egypt. Under the Gaza-Jericho Agreement, arrangements for the operation of the terminal were established to create “a mechanism that facilitates the entry and exit of people and goods, reflecting the new reality created by the Declaration of Principles, while providing full security for both sides”. The agreements also committed both the Israeli authorities and the PA to “do their utmost to maintain the dignity of persons passing through the border crossings”.

Despite the specific arrangements provided in the agreement for the joint operation of the terminal, the Israeli authorities control all stages of passage between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Since September 2000, new restricted operation hours and lengthy security checks reduced the passage of people and goods through the terminal. Imposed restrictions, partial or total closure, tend to be arbitrary with advance notice rarely provided by the Israeli authorities.

⁴ A process that entails the transfer of goods from one vehicle to another.

