



OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS
occupied Palestinian territory

The Gaza Strip: Access Report

March 2005

Overview

One month after the election of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as President of the Palestinian Authority in January 2005, Palestinian and Israeli leaders met in Sharm el-Sheikh and issued a call for an end to the four year's of conflict. Among the confidence building measures announced was an easing of the internal and external movement restrictions faced by the 1.4 million people living in the Gaza Strip. Over the course of the month of March, indicators show a steady improvement in movement in and out of the Gaza Strip, although problems still remain with the internal Gaza Strip enclaves – Al Mawasi, Siafa and Al Ma'ani. This report discusses movement and access for March at the main Gaza Strip crossing points, internally within the Gaza Strip and for the fishing industry.

1. Gaza Strip Crossing Points:

A. Erez crossing and industrial estate

Worker movement

There has been a **steady and progressive rise** in the number of workers and merchants entering Israel and Erez industrial zone over the course of the month. During the **first half of March**, the **number of workers** entering Israel **rarely exceeded 1100** daily. However, by the **end of March** the figure had risen to **over 3,700**, although movement into Israel was closed between 23 and 27 March to coincide with the Jewish Purim holiday.

The number of workers entering the industrial zone has also increased but at a slower rate with over **600 crossing daily** at the end of March compared to around **550 during the first half of the month**. The number of merchants entering Israel has also steadily increased with 240 crossing into Israel on 31 March compared to 102 on 1 March.

Key Dates

- 31 August 2004: Erez crossing was closed for almost three months following the discovery of explosives on a Palestinian worker trying to cross into Israel.
- 28 November 2004: A limited number of merchants and workers were able to re-enter Israel and the industrial zone.
- 14 January: The crossing was again closed following an attack by Palestinian militants in Karni that killed six Israelis (see below).
- 13 February: The crossing reopened and there has been a steady and sustained increase in the number of workers entering Israel and Erez industrial zone.

B. Karni Cargo Crossing Point

Imports and exports

Increased security measures were introduced at Karni following its reopening on 7 February. These security measures led to delays in the processing of cargo throughout most of February. In March, opening hours of the container section were extended to 11 pm (compared to 4 pm) which has reduced the backlog.

The March figures for the passage of commercial traffic are still not available from the Karni authorities however other sources - the Israeli DCL and Palestinian Ministry of Civil Affairs- indicate an increase in the volume of both imports and exports between February and March.

Humanitarian supplies

Container traffic in and out of the Gaza Strip became extremely difficult following the suicide attack at Ashdod port on 14 March 2004 which killed 10 Israelis. By January 2005, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) had more than 900 loaded containers waiting at Ashdod and 350 empty ones stuck inside the Gaza Strip.

Since 27 February 2005, an agreement has been reached with the Israelis to allow **20 full containers to enter the Gaza Strip daily** (Sunday through Thursday) via Sufa checkpoint, and **40 empty containers to leave the Gaza Strip daily** (Monday through Thursday) via Karni Cargo Crossing Point. This arrangement proceeded smoothly until 25 March when Sufa was closed to incoming containers.

Between 27 February and 31 March, **436 containers** were brought in and **678** taken out. However, by the end of the month over **124 empty containers** remained inside the Gaza Strip and **700 laden containers** remained in the port, including 300 that were received in March.

Key Dates

- 14 January: Karni Cargo Crossing Point was closed following an attack in the area that killed six Israelis.
- 7 February: Karni Cargo Crossing Point reopened for the passage of agricultural goods and humanitarian assistance.

C. Rafah crossing

Palestinian movement

A daily average of 265 people crossed into the Gaza Strip via Rafah crossing point throughout March.

A consistent flow of around **2,500 Palestinians departed through Rafah crossing point** for Egypt during March – an average of **360 people crossing daily**. This was an increase over the end of February when daily passage was approximately **250** people per day. However, over 400 people were crossing per day at the beginning of the February – the reduction in flow was a result of increased security screening measures that were introduced with the lifting of the age restrictions on Palestinian males from 20 February.

Throughout March, there has been persistent concerns raised by passengers and Palestinian officials based at Rafah crossing point over the use of an x-ray machine by the Israeli authorities for the purposes of screening. According to reports, the machine is far more advanced than the standard walk-through metal detectors seen at Erez and Tufah checkpoints and is similar to those used in hospitals. There is particular concern over the potential harmful effects of the radiation

emission from the machine as well as cultural sensitivities where the screening of women is concerned.

Key Dates

- 12 December 2004: Rafah crossing closed following the deaths of five Israeli soldiers during an attack by Palestinian militants.
- 21 January: The crossing reopened for arrivals from Egypt.
- 1 February: The crossing reopened for departures with the exception of Palestinian males aged 16 to 35. This group had been prevented from leaving the Gaza Strip since 17 April 2004, with all but a very few exceptions.
- 20 February: Palestinian males aged 16 to 35 were allowed to leave the Gaza Strip.

2. Internal Movement and Access within the Gaza Strip:

A. Abu Houli junction

From 9 February, Abu Houli checkpoint became operational 24 hours a day for vehicular traffic. Prior to this, the opening hours had been from 7am until 6pm. In a new development from 9 March, **private vehicles** were once again allowed to pass through the checkpoints but with the stipulation that there must be four people inside the vehicle. Between 17 June 2004 and 9 March 2005, all travel across the junction had to be in service taxis or commercial vehicles. People are still not allowed to cross by foot.

Movement of traffic through **Abu Houli is not two-way and delays occur**. As traffic moves from north to south across the junction, vehicles on the southern side wait for 20 to 30 minutes; the process is then reversed as the traffic from the south gets priority and vehicles on the northern side then have to wait.

B. Palestinian enclaves

1. Al Mawasi

Situated within the Israeli Gush Katif settlement block in the southern Gaza Strip are approximately 5,000 Palestinians living in Al Mawasi. Movement in and out of the enclave has been tightly controlled over the last four years. Entry and exit at Al Mawasi is only possible on foot via the Tufah checkpoint in the west of Khan Younis refugee camp while the southern entry-exit point at Tel es Sultan checkpoint has been closed since 14 June 2004.

The checkpoint opens twice daily from approximately 8am to 1pm, and 2:30pm to 5pm. Male Al Mawasi ID holders between 16 and 30 years of age require prior coordination with the IDF to pass through the checkpoint with similar conditions applying to females between 16 and 25. **Residents still face long delays** in returning to the enclave. During visits to Al Mawasi in March, OCHA encountered residents at Tufah check point who had been waiting for up to 3 days to re-enter.

International agencies have reported an improvement in their ability to obtain coordinated access into Al Mawasi in recent months.

2. Siafa

In the northern Israeli settlement block there are approximately 190 Palestinians living in Siafa. **Movement** into the enclave **remains tightly controlled** by the IDF. The opening hours in and out of the Siafa enclave are 7:30am and 2pm. The IDF controlled entry-exit gate is not open for a fixed time and closes again once people who have been waiting are allowed to pass. The limited number of hours has created persistent problems for school children who need to access nearby schools. Since 13 February, the IDF has permitted Palestinians aged 30 and older to pass in and

out of the area on foot without prior coordination. Both males and females aged 16 to 29 require 48 hours prior coordination.

3. Al Ma'ani

There is a third enclave Al Ma'ani, where around 180 Palestinians live, inside the Kfar Darom settlement. The situation here has not been as acute as in Al Mawasi and Siafa as the entry-exit gate generally opens four times daily. However, life inside the enclave remains problematic.

3. Fishing:

The Palestinian Department of Fisheries reported an **increase in the distance of the fishing zone** available to Palestinian fishermen. Since the election of Abu Mazen, the Israelis are now permitting fishing up to 10 nautical miles from the Gaza Strip coast compared to 6 nautical miles previously. Fishing is still not permitted over most of the Al Mawasi coastline as has been the case since October 2003.

06 April 2005

The Gaza Strip

