Gaza Access and Movement:
2013 Summary

In late June with the ouster of the Morsi government in Egypt and increased instability in the country, dramatic changes began to occur along the Gaza-Egypt border. Egyptian military forces destroyed tunnels which had been used over the years of the closure of Gaza to smuggle goods and weapons to the Strip. Rafah Crossing, between Gaza and Egypt, saw more frequent closures and new restrictions on travel of individuals were introduced, leading to a sharp decline in travel in the second half of the year.

Israel’s closure of Gaza reached the six year mark. Corresponding with the changes on the Egyptian border, more goods entered Gaza via Kerem Shalom Crossing and more exits were recorded at Erez Crossing, connecting Gaza to Israel and the West Bank. Nonetheless, sweeping and indiscriminate restrictions on travel and on movement of goods between Gaza and the West Bank and Israel remained nearly unchanged in 2013. Criteria for travel of people remained stringent and appear to have been enforced with greater severity, a punishing restriction on entrance of construction materials was introduced late in the year and Israel continued to enforce a ban on the exit of goods from Gaza to its traditional markets in Israel and the West Bank, despite the installment of a new and powerful scanner donated by the Dutch government at the cargo crossing, Kerem Shalom.

Highlights

- **Restrictions on exit of goods continue**: For the second time since 2007, in August, Israel permitted an exception to its ban on allowing goods from Gaza to enter Israel when it allowed two truckloads of palm fronds to enter Israel for the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon insisted on the need to maintain the ban despite the installation of a powerful scanner at the Kerem Shalom Crossing, a donation to the Palestinian Authority by the Government of the Netherlands.

- **Re-instatement of the ban on construction materials**: On October 13th, following the announcement of discovery of a tunnel dug between Gaza and Israel, Israel halted the transfer of construction materials to the Strip. On December 8th, it announced it would allow some goods to enter for UN projects but not for the private sector.

- **Punitive actions following rocket fire**: Following Operation Pillar of Defense, in November 2012 Israel announced an expansion of the permitted fishing area, which was reduced again in March 2013 and then re-expanded in May. Also throughout the year, as a response to rocket fire, the defense minister ordered Kerem Shalom Crossing closed on six occasions.

- **Restrictions on people**: In 2013, Israel continued to restrict movement of people between Gaza, Israel and the West Bank to “exceptional humanitarian cases, with an emphasis on urgent medical cases”. At the same time, as travel via Rafah was reduced in the second half of the year, increases were seen in the number of exits via Erez in all categories.
Following on reduced tunnel activity and restrictions on entrance of construction materials via Kerem Shalom, fourth quarter statistics on unemployment rates reflect an 18.4% increase in unemployment to 38.5%, the highest rate recorded since late 2010. About 29,400 people joined the ranks of the unemployed in Gaza in the 4th quarter, bringing the total number of unemployed to 159,600.

Movement of goods

Officially, the ban on sale of goods from Gaza to the West Bank, in effect since June 2007, remained in place in 2013. Israel allowed goods to transit to the West Bank and Israel in two exceptional cases: 15 truckloads of date bars for a World Food Programme project in the West Bank and 2 truckloads of palm fronds for the Sukkot holiday into Israel.

Export was allowed out of Gaza for sale abroad, mainly agricultural produce which exits between November and May as part of a project partially subsidized by the Government of the Netherlands. Exported goods all transited via Israeli territory after undergoing inspection at Kerem Shalom Crossing.

In 2013, 185 truckloads of goods exited Gaza, which is less than 2% of what exited before the closure. Prior to June 2007, when sale of goods out of Gaza was blocked, 85% of the goods sold outside the Strip were sold in Israel and the West Bank.

In October, Israel re-instated the ban on entrance of construction materials, which it partially reversed in December for select projects implemented by international organizations.

Exit of goods from Gaza via Kerem Shalom in 2013

In 2013, 15.4 truckloads of goods exited Gaza per month, which is less than 2% of what exited monthly before the closure.

Unemployment rate in Gaza 2000-2013
Punitive actions following rocket fire

In 2013, Israel closed the Kerem Shalom crossing on six occasions in response to the firing of rockets from Gaza (February 27 to March 3, March 21 to March 27, April 8 to April 11, April 28 to April 30, June 24 to 25, December 25 to 26).

Statements by Israeli officials (which can be found here) indicated that the operation of the crossing was disrupted in response to the rocket fire but not because of a direct threat to the crossing itself, raising questions about the military necessity of closing the crossings and the subsequent harm caused to civilians.

The closing of Kerem Shalom disrupted scheduled export convoys, resulting in losses to Palestinian farmers in Gaza as well as to Israeli farmers. Ilan Eshel, chairman of the Israel Fruit Growers’ Association told Gisha in March that he estimated that for each day that Kerem Shalom was closed, Israeli farmers lost between 300,000-600,000 shekels.

On April 10, James Rawley, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator, said that the closure of Kerem Shalom was leading to “the depletion of stocks of essential supplies, including basic foodstuffs and cooking gas, and undermine[s] the livelihoods and rights of many vulnerable Gazan families”.

Movement of people

During 2013 about 4,766 exits of Palestinians were recorded per month at Erez, most of them businesspeople and medical patients and their companions. The number of exits per month via Erez was 27% higher than the monthly average in 2012. It appears that demand for travel increased over the course of 2013 in response to the closure of Rafah and Israel also appears to have allowed more individuals to travel, though criteria for travel remained unchanged in 2013.

Since August, more exits were recorded at the Erez crossing than at Rafah. Yet, comparing the first and second half of the year, while about 1,200 more exits were recorded at Erez per month on average, 15,500 fewer were recorded at Rafah, such that travel via Erez did not nearly compensate for the closures at Rafah.

*Displayed in the graph are exits via Erez of Palestinians only. On average, about 567 exits of non-Palestinians were recorded at Erez per month in 2013. Passenger lists available for Rafah Crossing do not provide details about the identities or reasons for travel of passengers.
Access restricted areas on land and at sea

Following Operation Pillar of Defense (Nov. 21, 2012), Israel extended the fishing limit off the Gaza coast from 3 to 6 nautical miles, however, it reversed the extension in March 2013 following incidents of rocket fire and then extended it again in May 2013. Israel prevents access in the buffer zone from a distance of 300 meters from the border fence. Correspondence between Gisha and military authorities in the early part of the year revealed confusion about the demarcation of the land access restrictions and thus concern about the protection of civilians in these areas. Incidents of fire on civilians further than 300 meters were recorded throughout the year. For further information, see the United Nations’ Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) or the following report by Gisha: Blurring boundaries.

As the graph reflects, in 2013, an average of 4,766 exits of Palestinians were recorded per month. In 2003, at a time of increased violence and unrest in the Occupied Territory, an average of 9,000 people traveled via Erez per day, compared to 26,000 per day before the start of the Second Intifada in September 2000.

Update on status and residency rights in 2013

Residency and travel restrictions continued to affect family reunification. Travel from Gaza to the West Bank for the purpose of family reunification did not feature in the criteria for travel. Despite changes made to the “Procedure for Handling Applications by Gaza Strip Residents for Settlement in the Judea and Samaria Area”, following criticism by the Supreme Court, the criteria remained so restrictive that it was clear that nearly no one would be able to meet them. The changes made include 1) a willingness to examine applications for reunification with second-degree family members instead of just first-degree relatives in the case of chronic medical patients and orphans and 2) the addition of a catch-all clause which gives discretion to COGAT to review applications of a humanitarian nature. Gisha filed a Freedom of Information request to determine how many people had managed to file requests for reunification according to the procedure and the state’s response was “zero”, confirming our analysis that the procedure sets unreasonable criteria and that Israel continues to effectively bar Palestinians in Gaza from reuniting with family members in the West Bank.

In June 2013, following legal intervention by Gisha, the Ministry of Interior withdrew its demand for genetic testing for Israeli citizens who live in the Gaza Strip and have no Israeli identification documents. The ministry's new position came after Gisha petitioned (Hebrew) the District Court on behalf of Ms. al-Wahidi. The state had demanded that al-Wahidi undergo genetic testing in order to be able to enter Israel to have her identity papers renewed but at the request of the court, the state agreed to hold an inquiry in order to identify if the petitioner was an Israeli citizen by other means. Once her identity was confirmed, she was issued an Israeli passport, entered Israel and was reunited with her mother, whom she had not seen for 12 years.