



The Gaza Strip: February Access Report¹ Closure at Karni Crossing 8 March 2006

Karni crossing (al Muntar) has been closed since 22 February. It was previously shut between 15 January and 4 February.

As of 8 March, Karni crossing has been closed 40 days in 2006 or 60% of the year.² In comparison, Karni was closed for a total of 18% of the year for the whole of 2005 and 19% of the year in 2004. (Figure 1)

The Israeli Defense Forces state that the reason for Karni's closure is the suspected presence of tunnels dug by Palestinian militants leading to the crossing. At the request of the IDF, Palestinian security services have dug four trenches, totalling more than one kilometre in length around the crossing, in an effort to find these tunnels. So far, none have been found.

Figure 1: Yearly percentage in which Karni crossing was closed (total and partial)³

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006 (as of 8 Mar)
% closed	8%	6%	24%	19%	18%	60%

Unavailability of essential foods

Basic food commodities are no longer available in the Gaza Strip. Wheat flour, the main ingredient for the Palestinian staple of bread, will run out on 9 March.⁴ Matahin, the largest flour mill in Gaza, has received just three truckloads of wheat grain since 5 January. Its operations shut down on 4 March, when its last 6,000 metric tonnes was released to local bakeries. The other five large flour mills shut down their operations on 23 February.

Palestine Flour Mills Company, which represents the six flour mills in the Gaza Strip, currently has 16,000 MT of wheat grain waiting in eight Israeli warehouses to enter the Gaza Strip via Karni crossing. Normally, 30 – 60 days of stocks are maintained in the Gaza Strip.

There is also a shortage of dairy products, especially milk, fruit and construction materials.⁵ Prices are rising rapidly (Figure 2), disproportionately affecting the poor.

Figure 2: Prices of Sugar and Wheat Flour (NIS)

	Sugar (1 Kg)	Wheat Flour (1 Kg)
Pre Karni closure (21 Feb)	2.5	1.5
28 February	3.0	1.5
6 March	4.0	2.0
% increase	37.5%	25%

Agricultural exports halted

Exports from the Gaza Strip stopped during the peak of the agricultural season, further reducing monetary flows to Gaza's 1.3 million population. Vast quantities of vegetables are rotting or being released for negligible returns on the local market. On 6 March, for example, 50 metric tonnes (MT) of tomatoes and cherry tomatoes and 5 MT of peppers were dumped into a land fill site in the former Israeli settlement area of Netzar Khazani. The working day for the 700 employees in this former settlement area has been reduced from six to four days and is typical of the other greenhouse areas.

The Palestinian agricultural sector had anticipated higher yields this harvest following Israeli – Palestinian agreement of 15 November 2005 brokered by the US.



Rotting tomatoes in Netzar Khazani

Photo by: OCHA oPt, 8 March 2006

During the time Karni was open (from 5 – 21 February), up to 80 truckloads were exported per day. Based on this, the Palestine Trade Center (PalTrade) estimates Palestinian daily losses at about \$600,000, or more than \$7 million in total (Figure 3). The total economic losses of exported goods due to the closures in 2006 are estimated at more than \$17 million, as of 8 March.

There have also been costs to the Israeli economy for food and other imports destined for Gaza, as well as for Israeli textile producers that use Gaza workshops.

Figure 3: Estimated Palestinian Export losses (as of 8 March)

	Average volume / day	Daily losses / USD	Total losses / USD (22 Feb – 8 Mar)
Strawberries	40 tonnes	68,080	816,960
Cut Flowers	550 stems	35,200	422,400
GAP ⁶ (various produce)	94 tonnes	70,124	841,488
Other Agricultural	108 tonnes	59,400	712,800
Textiles and garments	8 truckloads	160,000	1,920,000
Furniture	7 truckloads	105,000	1,260,000
Scrap Metal	2 truckloads	20,000	240,000
Other Industrial	4 truckloads	88,000	1,056,000
Total losses /USD		605,804	7,269,648

Impact on Humanitarian Assistance⁷

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the World Food Programme (WFP) (providing food assistance to 51% and 12% of the Gazan population respectively) rely on the Gaza mills as a source for wheat flour for their distributions to the most needy. The wheat flour warehouses for both agencies are practically empty.⁸ At the end of February, UNRWA had 98 laden containers of humanitarian supplies waiting at Ashdod port ready for crossing into the Gaza Strip. UNRWA had planned to start its emergency distribution programme on 19 March but it has now been put on hold.

UNRWA has started to reduce fuel usage and estimates that unless new batches of petrol enter the Gaza Strip, it will run out of fuel in mid-March.

The WFP requires 6,450 MT tonnes of food to cover its 163,000 beneficiaries until end of March, but this is also not available. Both agencies are in contact the Israeli authorities to solve the access issues and to bring in urgently required commodities.

UNICEF had to coordinate the access of some 10,400 vials of vaccines (Measles and Hepatitis B) through Erez due to the closure of Karni.

Karni closure – Timeline

5 January: The IDF requests the Palestinian Authority (PA) to dig a trench west of the Karni crossing to intercept a possible tunnel leading to the crossing. The PA starts this work the same day, digging a 6 metre trench approximately 1km in length.

20 January: The PA completes the trench. According to the IDF, one tunnel was discovered, while according to the PA, a small hole, possibly the start of a tunnel, connecting to a water pipeline was discovered.

23 January: The IDF notifies the PA that it has information of another tunnel and requests the PA to dig a deeper trench, this time 10m in depth.

30 January: Completion by PA of trench. No tunnel located. The IDF requests the PA to dig another trench, 10m in depth, 300m long, 500m northwest of Karni crossing.

31 January: PA begins third trench.

14 February: Sufa Crossing closed for security reasons

21 February: Karni is closed in the evening amid Israeli reports of an explosion in the vicinity of the crossing.

27 February: The IDF requests the PA to dig a trench, 20m long and 4m deep on a specific location near Karni crossing. The PA complies but no tunnels are found. Digging continues.

1 March: Israeli Defense Minister Mofaz indicates that Karni will re-open on 2 March. However this did not take place.

The IDF has offered Kerem Shalom or Sufa as an alternative crossing point for imports and exports. This has been opposed by the PA which claims that its capacity would not cope with the volume of commercial traffic and that this temporary arrangement might continue indefinitely with Karni being closed down.

Despite the closures the volume of imported goods increased during February compared to the very low flow in January. Both were well below the 2005 monthly average.

One of the major points of the 15 November Agreement on Movement and Access was “facilitating the movement of people and goods...” . It set a goal of 150 daily exported truckloads by end of 2005 and 400 by the end of 2006. Over the month of February 2006 the average number of truckloads exported daily was 41.⁹

Erez crossing

a. Access for Palestinian workers and traders into Israel (Figure 4)

Erez crossing is the only access point for Gazan workers and traders with valid permits to enter Israel. Men are eligible for permits if aged 35 years and above, and if married with children. Criteria for trader permits are the same, except the age restriction on men is set at 30 years and above.

During February, a higher number of workers and traders crossed.¹⁰ Erez was closed from 9 – 11 February following a Palestinian attack at the crossing. However these opening times improved on previous months – Erez was closed from 16 December – 21 January.

b. Access for medical referrals

Medical referrals require passage through Erez crossing for treatment in Israel. Figure for referrals crossing in February are not available.

c. Access for humanitarian organisations

International humanitarian organisations require prior coordination with Israeli authorities to enter and leave the Gaza Strip through Erez crossing. A small number of high-level Palestinian UN staff members are permitted to cross.

On 14 February, the IDF introduced new procedures at Erez crossing for internationals leaving the Gaza Strip. The vehicles of international staff members with ID cards issued by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs are subject to a external search with a ‘sniffer dog’ by a private security company but no internal checks are made. While this has accelerated the actual checking process, the waiting time on the Palestinian side has significantly increased, with international organisations frequently waiting for more than two hours until receiving the Israeli instruction to proceed through checking.

Since 23 February 2006, UN national staff members have been unable to cross in vehicles driven by international staff. UN national staff members were instructed to exit the vehicle at the

southern gatepost and continue to the VIP lounge through the workers tunnels. This has not been accepted by the UN and national staff members are currently unable to cross Erez at the current time.

1. Rafah crossing

Rafah passenger crossing is the point of access for Gazans travelling overseas and is located on the Gazan border with Egypt. The border is controlled jointly by the Palestinian Authority and Egypt.

a. *Palestinians' access internationally from the Gaza Strip* (Figure 5)

Since 18 December 2005, Rafah crossing has operated from 8am to 4pm. Since the PA and Egypt started to jointly operate the crossing on 25 November 2005, the flow of people crossing has increased. This month, however, the number of arrivals was lower compared to last month and reflects the high January figures due to the return of pilgrims in that month..

b. *Import of international goods*

According to the 15 November Agreement between the Palestinian and Israeli authorities, Kerem Shalom crossing will operate as an alternative crossing point for imported goods primarily originating from Egypt and for non-Palestinian identification card holders arriving to the Gaza Strip from Egypt. According to the Israeli authorities, the crossing is ready for commercial transportation and foreign passage on the Israeli side. According to the PA, preparations for the opening of the crossing are unfinished on the Palestinian side.

c. *Restrictions on medical referrals*

Medical referrals require passage through Rafah crossing for international treatment. Figures for referrals crossing in February are not available.

2. Sufa Commercial Crossing (Figure 6)

Sufa crossing borders Israel and is situated northeast of Rafah crossing. In the past, this crossing point was open for a number of Palestinians working in the agricultural sector on farms in southern Israel. However, since 30 May 2004 the crossing has only been used for importing construction materials, notably gravel.

In February 2006, the total truckloads of gravel imported at Sufa crossing were significantly lower than previous months. This is due to the ongoing closure at Sufa crossing since 14 February,

Figure 4: Erez Crossing - average daily labour movement

	February 2000	February 2004	February 2005	December 2005	January 2006	February 2006
Workers to Israel	20,968	6,769	390	1,502	707	3,698
Traders to Israel	N/A	N/A	70	73	34	155

Source: Palestinian National Security Forces; 2000 and 2004 data obtained from UNSCO

Source: Palestinian Ministry of National Economy; 2000 and 2004 data obtained from UNSCO.

imposed due to Israel's stated security considerations. The IDF has requested that the PA implement new security procedures at the crossing. It remains unclear what these new procedures entail as this is an "import-only" crossing for goods entering Gaza from Israel.

3. Nahal Oz energy pipelines (Figure 7)

Palestine General Petroleum Company (GPC), a company owned by the PA, imports fuel (including benzene, diesel and gas) into the Gaza Strip through its Israeli counterpart, Dor Energy using the Nahal Oz pipelines. Data for imported fuel this month is not available.

4. Coastal area

a. *Access for Palestinian fishing* (Figure 8)

The fishing catch in February 2006 (58 tonnes) was higher than the previous month but lower than the catch in February 2000, 2004 and 2005.

Since January 2005, the Israeli authorities have permitted Palestinian fishing up to 10 nautical miles from the Gaza Strip coastline compared to six nautical miles previously. Under the Oslo Accords, Gaza Strip fishermen are entitled to fish 20 nautical miles from the coast. Palestinian fishing is prohibited one nautical mile north of the border with Egypt and one and a half nautical miles south of the border with Israel.

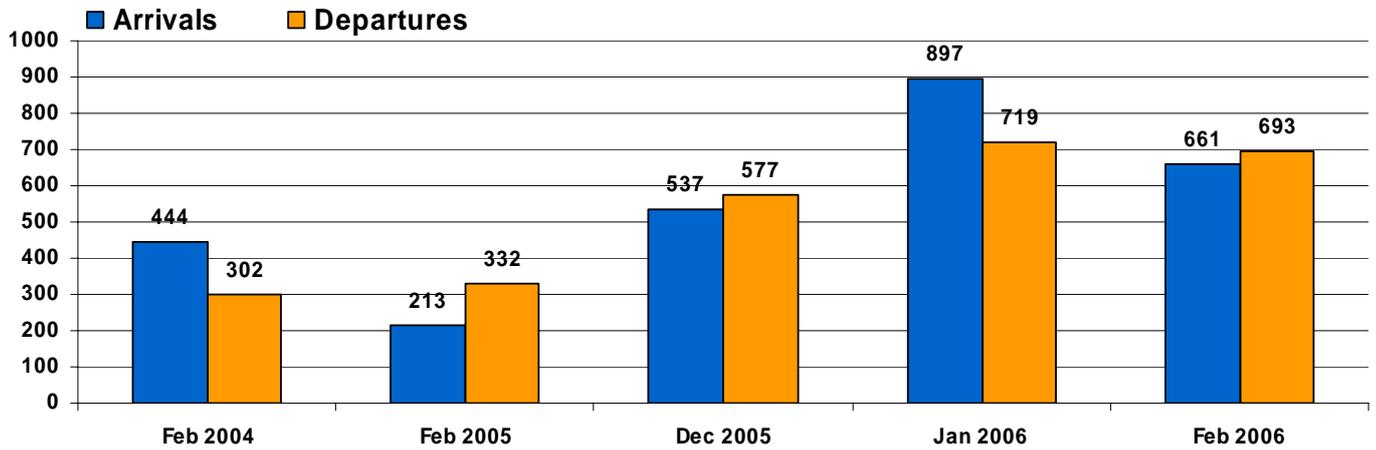
b. *Seaport*

The 15 November Agreement stated that construction of a seaport in the Gaza Strip can commence. However, following the PLC elections, the Israeli government has stopped talks with the PA on this issue.

5. Airport

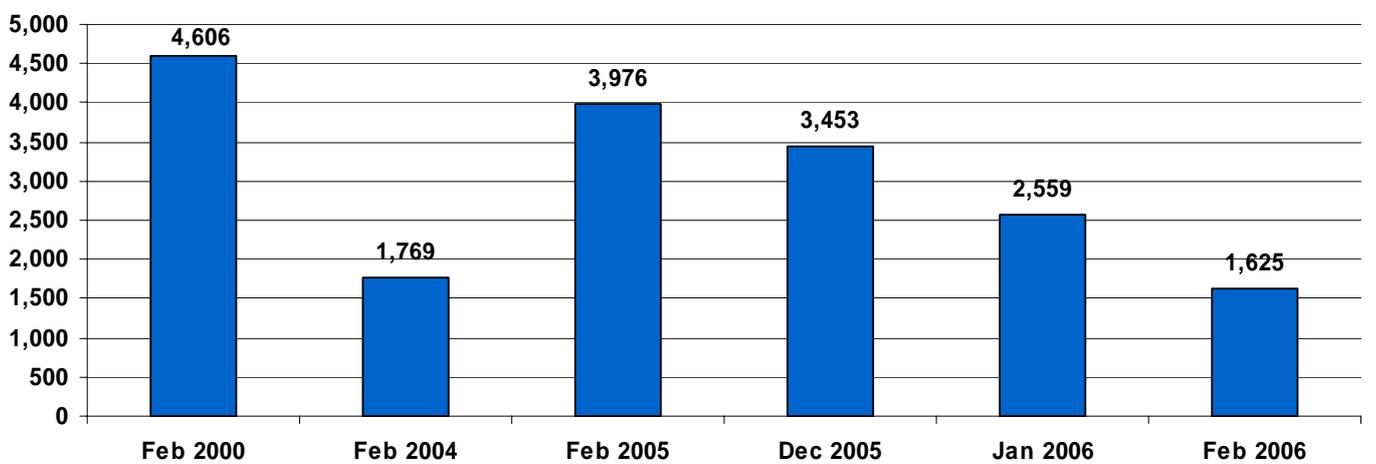
The Palestinian airport in the Gaza Strip has been closed since the beginning of the second *intifada* in late September 2000. The 15 November Agreement mentions "an understanding between the parties [the PA and the Gol] on the importance of an operating Palestinian airport...", however following the PLC elections, the Israeli government has cut off all talks with the PA on this issue.

Figure 5: Rafah Passenger Crossing - average daily crossing



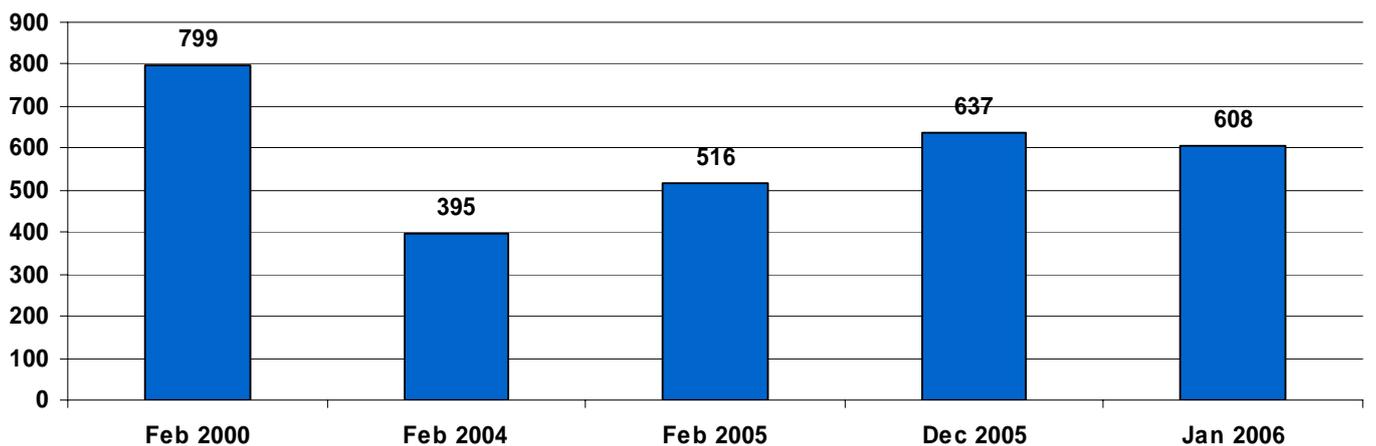
Source: Palestinian Passport and Border police. Jan 2004 data obtained from UNSCO.

Figure 6: Sufa Commercial Crossing – total imported truckloads of gravel¹¹



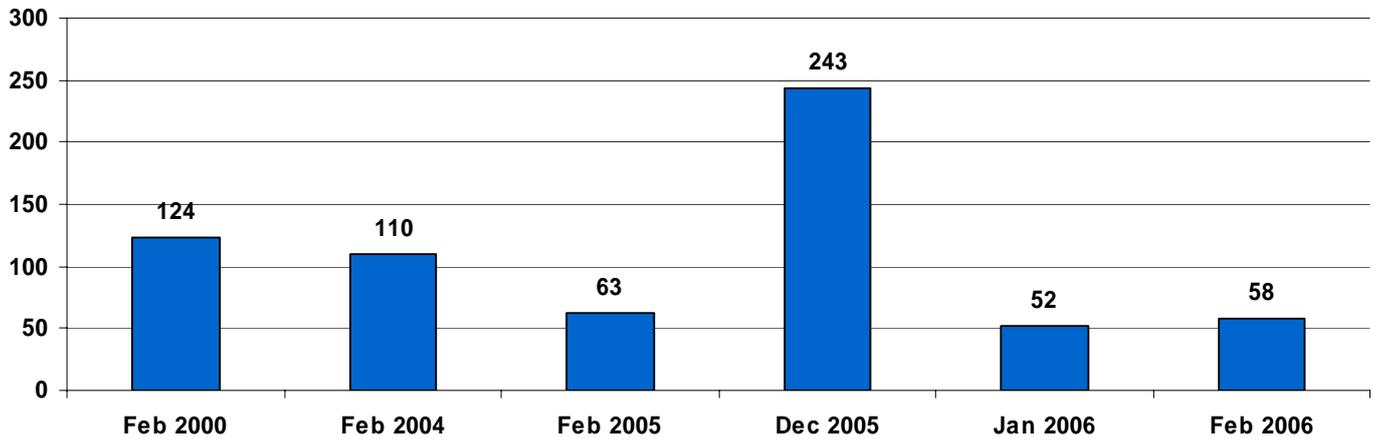
Source: Palestinian Ministry of Finance, data obtained from UNSCO.

Figure 7: Nahal Oz Pipeline – total imported truckloads of fuel (industrial gasoline excluded)



Source: General Petroleum Company (GPC), data obtained from UNSCO.

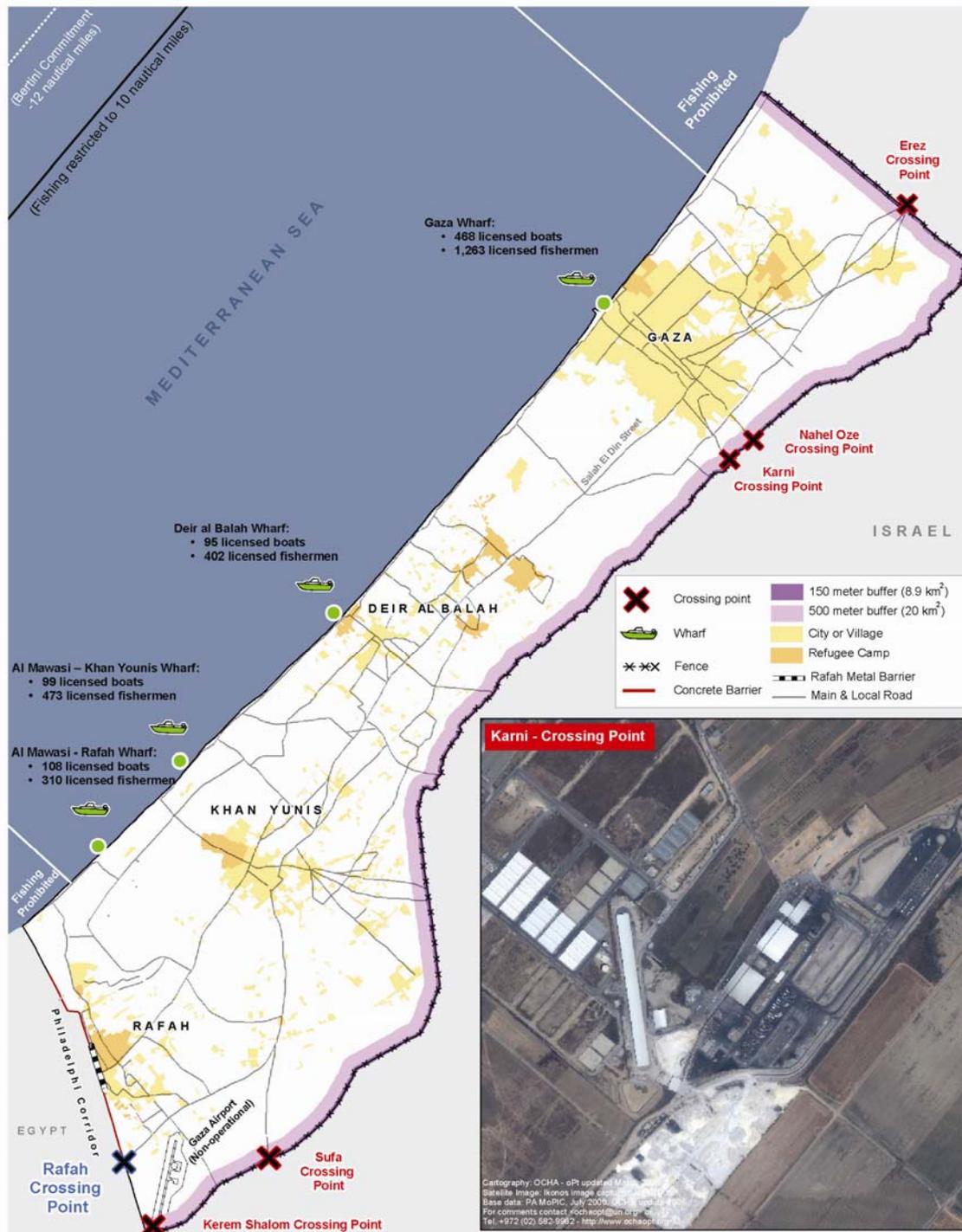
Figure 8: Gaza Fishing - total fishing catch in tonnes



Source: Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture/Department of Fisheries

Gaza Access Map

Closure at Karni crossing point - 8 March 2006



¹ This report monitors access in and out of the Gaza Strip. Movement in and out of the Gaza Strip is controlled through:

- Erez crossing for Palestinian workers and merchants and medical referrals who have permits to enter Israel;
- Erez crossing for international organisations;
- Rafah crossing, between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, for access to other countries, including for overseas medical referrals; and
- Four commercial crossings, of which Karni crossing is the largest.

All movement between Israel and the Gaza Strip is controlled by the Israeli authorities. Fences and a concrete wall surround the Gaza Strip, Palestinian access to the sea is controlled by Israeli naval vessels and Palestinian air traffic is prohibited.

² Four of the days (10-13 January – ‘Eid al Adha) were due to Palestinian decision making.

³ Palestine Ministry of National Economy/2000 – 2004 Data obtained from UNSCO

⁴ WFP - Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM/ME) based on Ministry of National Economy estimations.

⁵ Sufa crossing has been shut since 14 February.

⁶ Gaza Agricultural Project.

⁷ Information received from UNRWA, WFP Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM/ME) and UNICEF.

⁸ UNRWA has about 1,000 metric tonnes for its regular programming left as of 8 March.

⁹ The average daily movement number of truckloads of goods through Karni crossing is calculated excluding weekends i.e. Saturdays.

¹⁰ The average daily Palestinian labour movement through Erez crossing is calculated excluding weekends i.e. Fridays and Saturdays.

¹¹ One truckload equals 40 tonnes.