

Bethlehem Checkpoint 300

Humanitarian situation deteriorates

Since October 2013, a number of humanitarian concerns have led to a deteriorating situation at the Bethlehem Checkpoint 300. Frequently the humanitarian lane is not opened and few Israeli soldiers or security staff are on duty, leading to overcrowding. The overcrowding reaches the level where it becomes dangerous to the people going through the checkpoint. These problems are worse on Sundays, which is the busiest day of the week. At the beginning of April, construction work began on the checkpoint, for which reason the exit lane is now used as entrance and the humanitarian lane as exit. No information about these changes were announced, which has caused a lot of confusion and resulted in more squeezing and pushing.

We ask all diplomats and international agencies to contact Israeli authorities to improve the situation at the checkpoint, which not only obstructs freedom of movement, but is extremely dangerous for those who pass through.

Background

Israeli authorities installed Checkpoint 300 at the end of 2005, despite the fact that the International Court of Justice deemed the building of the separation wall illegal in 2004. Checkpoint 300 is the main crossing point into Jerusalem for residents of Bethlehem and is located approximately 2 km inside the green line. Since January 2014, between 4,000 to 6,000 workers cross this checkpoint daily between 4 am to 7 am in order to reach their places of employment in East Jerusalem and Israel.



Before construction in April 2014, the main lane at the Checkpoint 300 was like a cage. Without complications it was already a humiliating experience. Photo EAPPI/S. Amrad.

Main Problems at Checkpoint 300

HUMANITARIAN LANE - The humanitarian lane is intended for elderly & sick people, students, women, children, and internationals to cross the checkpoint, while avoiding the crowded queue of male workers. Although this lane should be open daily, especially in the mornings, the humanitarian lane has frequently not been opened on Sundays since January. Moreover, Israeli staff at the checkpoint have rarely opened the humanitarian gate during the weekdays, forcing elderly people, women and children to join the very disorderly main lane, where pushing, fighting and yelling is commonplace.

When asked why they are not opening the humanitarian gate, Israeli soldiers respond that there is 'no Matak' on duty and they cannot open the humanitarian gate. "The Matak" refers to the DCL officer in charge of humanitarian matters and the one with the authority to man the humanitarian gate. Moreover, the humanitarian turnstile has for the past months been broken, requiring an Israeli soldier to manually turn it to let people through.

In order to avoid the long queue, those who normally use the humanitarian lane, walk up the exit lane. The Israeli soldiers, however, often refuse to open the exit turnstile for them to enter the main lane. When they are refused, they are unable to get out of the exit lane area without squeezing past a large group of men (see exit lane blocked). Since January 2014, schoolgirls, teachers, and other people who should be able to cross the checkpoint using the humanitarian gate have been told to use the main lane. This means that more vulnerable groups struggle to pass the checkpoint in the morning without being crushed in the crowd of workers in the main queue.

"I almost fainted in there and had to get out."

"I was hit in the back while in the queue."

"This is getting worse."

~Comments reported from those crossing the checkpoint

EXIT LANE BLOCKED – There is a small gap in the fence between the exit lane and the main queue at Checkpoint 300. Since January 2014, the men have used this hole to enter the main queue from the exit lane. As a result, approximately 50 people block the exit lane, inhibiting others from exiting the checkpoint. This reality, combined with the closure of the humanitarian gate, means that vulnerable groups are unable to pass the checkpoint without squeezing through a large group of men, which is the reason that the humanitarian gate was created.

Case 1

Israeli soldiers did not allow a 14 year old schoolgirl to use the humanitarian gate. Instead, she tried to use the exit gate in order to get through the checkpoint, so that she could avoid waiting amongst the crowd of men waiting to go to work. It was 7 am when she entered to get to school at 8 am. The Israeli soldier managing the checkpoint point told her she must use the main lane. She was terrified to use the main lane crowded with men and waited inside the terminal until an EAPPI human rights monitor (EA) walked through the lane with her.



In the mornings, 4,000 to 6,000 people go through Checkpoint 300, mostly male workers on their way to jobs in East Jerusalem or Israel. For elderly, ill, women and children, waiting in this crowd of men is a frightening and often dangerous experience. Photo EAPPI/S. Amrad.

INSUFFICIENT CAPACITY AND LACK OF STAFF – Frequently, only 1 or 2 metal detectors are open at Checkpoint 300. This results in delays and a backlog of people. With over 4,000 people trying to cross the checkpoint, a crowd forms in the cage of the lanes when the turnstile is not opened often. Tension rises and people begin to climb over the roof and drop on top of people who have waited in the queue for a long time. Consequently, a crush occurs near the turnstile and large groups of men practically fall through the entrance pushed by the weight of the crowd. Many fall over or hold their hands, chests and arms, which were injured in the crush of people. In addition, the crush leads to several people trying to enter the same turnstile slot at the same time, resulting in heavy squeezing and potentially very dangerous situations. In March 2014, EAs observed a man spitting blood after exiting the turnstile where he had squeezed in with two other men.

ISRAELI SOLDIERS – In March 2014, a new group of Israeli soldiers began working at the checkpoint, as frequently occurs throughout the year. Whenever new soldiers begin staffing the checkpoint, their lack of experience means that they are not capable of dealing with the situation at the checkpoint. New soldiers are not properly trained in managing the checkpoint. EAs have had to explain to the soldiers that there IS a humanitarian gate that should be opened daily and who is allowed to go through. An EA also witnessed a soldier watching a film on his phone, instead of managing the checkpoint terminal, and other soldiers falling asleep on duty or shouting at Palestinians. In March 2014, EAs also reported that the situation became so chaotic that soldiers on duty seemed terrified, desperately calling superiors for help, with one female soldier breaking down crying. The lack of training for soldiers and their behavior leads to more crowding at the checkpoint and contributes to the feeling of tension.

PRIVATE SECURITY GUARDS – The Israeli security guards often act in an unprofessional way: shouting and sometimes acting violently. EAs have witnessed these security guards shouting aggressively at Palestinians and Internationals in English, Hebrew and Arabic. With new groups of inexperienced soldiers, the situation at the checkpoint relies more on the private security guards. In April 2014, one of the security guards on three occasions grabbed and pushed violently a male EA after telling the EA that he was not allowed to observe inside the checkpoint.



When delays are frequent, men climb on the roofs and drop down at the front of the line. This creates a crush near the turnstile and injuries occur. Photo EAPPI/S. Amrad.

Case 2

A Palestinian man tried to pass the checkpoint through the humanitarian gate, although he was not over 60 (the age requirement for using the humanitarian gate). When DCL officer caught him, he did not just send the man back to the main queue, but confiscated the man's permit, which was still valid for another 2 months. Although the man apologized several times and begged for 2 hours to give back his permit, the officer refused. When an EA asked why he would not give back the permit, he answered: "Because I can."

Please act now. For more information contact eappi.communications@gmail.com or +972 (0)54 737 9766.