

Catholic displaced in 1948 to light torch for Israeli celebrations

JERUSALEM – Yossef Mtanes said it was not an easy decision to agree to be one of the symbolic torch lighters at the April 19 opening of Israel's 62nd Independence Day celebrations.

An 82-year-old Maronite Catholic, Mtanes was born in the northern village of Biram, which was destroyed during Israel's 1948 war of independence.

But Israel wanted to honor Mtanes for his actions as a 19-year-old, when he worked in the offices in the then-British-run refinery. When a riot broke out in November 1947, Mtanes hid his six Jewish co-workers, protecting them from injury and possible death.

Since then, he also has worked to ensure ethnic Jews and Arabs live peacefully together.

"I want to emphasize that it was not an easy decision to take, it was not comfortable," said Mtanes, who today lives in Haifa, where he worked for more than 40 years and raised his six children. "It is not easy for me and the people of Biram. But I know it is a private honor for me personally and out of respect for me, for something I did before the establishment of the state."

Mtanes said his deep religious faith has directed his actions throughout his life.

"I believe in God and I believe that it is forbidden to kill an innocent man," he said. "What else could I have done? These were innocent people who had nothing to do with the violence going on outside. I am very proud that they have remembered me after 63 years and want to (show their respect) for me."

On April 15, five days before the opening ceremony, Mtanes came to Jerusalem along with the other 13 other torch lighters. They were honored with a medal in a special lunch at the Knesset and took part in the dress rehearsal of the official independence ceremony.

His son, Kamil Mtanes, 52, said his father is a prominent member of the Maronite community in Israel and has been very active preserving its history.

"I am very proud to be the son of such a father," he said. "He has always been a guiding light for us."

Biram, Mtanes' native village, was destroyed by fledgling Israeli forces after the residents left voluntarily when they were promised they would be able to return within a short time.

Although the Israeli Supreme Court has ruled that the villagers were wrongfully removed from their village and many successive Israeli governments have supported the return of Biram's residents, no government has actually taken action to move the case forward.

In Haifa, Mtanes has seen the fruits of his co-existence work in the shape of numerous projects, including the annual winter Festival of Festivals, which attracts tens of thousands of visitors to the mostly Arab neighborhood of Wadi Nisnas, where years before Jews were afraid to enter.

But yet, he said, he cannot be optimistic about the future of the country or region.

"In Haifa (co-existence) is working but not so much so in the rest of the country," he said. "From what I hear in the streets I am pessimistic. People are always talking about peace, but there is no peace. The way the situation is today I am afraid there will be a disaster in all of the Middle East. Now everybody has missiles and the borders are irrelevant.

"Who knows where we are headed. Only God knows," he added. "And I trust in him."

He said that while Arab citizens of Israel are afforded social services similar to those offered Jewish citizens, work still needs to be done to assure equal treatment in other areas such as education and employment.

One place where Arab citizens have excelled, he said, is the health care field.

"I live in this country and it does help us with social rights such as health insurance

and national social security ... and I never dreamed that the hospitals would be staffed by Arabs," he said. "I see on television how Arabs in Arab countries live, and we here have a higher quality of life, but still it is difficult ... still there are things which can be improved."

As he talked about the present and the future, Mtanes remembered his past, and he mused that at least the church and cemetery in Biram were left intact and refugees were permitted to visit the church for weddings and religious ceremonies.

"I already know where I will be in the end. I will return (to Biram); at least the dead are allowed to return," he said.