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UNICEF Photo of the Year 2021

In the eye of the storm

The UNICEF Photo of the Year 2021 captures the helplessness and at the same time the determination of a girl in the face of a raging force of nature: A devastating cyclone in the Bay of Bengal had swept away her family's tea shop. Indian photographer Supratim Bhattacharjee's winning image from India's Sundarbans is a powerful testament to children's struggle for survival in the face of advancing environmental degradation and climate change.

The winner of this year's second prize is Indian photographer Sourav Das, who portrayed a teacher who turned an entire village into an outdoor classroom during the coronavirus lockdown. Iraqi photographer Younes Mohammad is awarded third prize for his series on families with fathers maimed by war.

"The look of the young girl on the UNICEF Photo of the Year 2021 pulls at the heartstrings", said Elke Büdenbender, patroness of UNICEF Germany. "Her calmness and bravery in a completely desperate situation make us feel what environmental destruction and climate change mean for children and young people. This year's winning image challenges us all to think about the consequences of our way of life and to change it."

"The year 2021 was like the sequel to a gloomy disaster movie for many girls and boys around the world," said Peter Matthias Gaede, vice chairman of UNICEF Germany. "Climate crisis, coronavirus pandemic, wars and disasters are forming the 'perfect storm' that is hitting children from poor families with full force. We need to strengthen their resilience to withstand this existential threat."

"The work of photojournalists around the world continued to be severely limited by the coronavirus pandemic. A number of German photographers were among those who nevertheless were able to produce moving images and photo series," said Prof. Klaus Honnef, chairman of the jury. The jury of UNICEF's Photo of the Year has selected twelve outstanding photo stories that focus on the small joys as well as the hardships of growing up today."

The winning picture: Drowned hopes

As the result of a tropical cyclone, the water in the Ganges Delta burst its banks. The floods swept away the small tea shop that twelve-year-old Pallavi Paduya and her family ran on Namkhana Island. And with it their entire livelihood. Indian photographer Supratim Bhattacharjee met the girl in 2020 one day after the disaster, standing in the ruins of her life. For the people in the Sundarbans, a coastal region in India and Bangladesh, it is part of the painful experience that entire villages are washed away, islands gradually sink and that the children's path to school leads through knee-deep water. The ongoing destruction of the mangrove forests along with rising sea levels and a salinization of former freshwater areas are depriving families of their livelihoods. UNICEF estimates that some 530 million children in Asia and Africa are growing up in regions affected by flooding.

The second prize: A small yet great victory over the pandemic

Their classrooms locked and online learning more fantasy than reality because of a lack of internet connection or because their parents cannot afford cell phones and laptops. For millions of girls and boys, the coronavirus pandemic has meant no school at all, often for months at a time. Thanks to the initiative of Indian teacher Deep Narayan Nayak, who moved the school in his village outdoors and turned the walls of the houses into blackboards, the local girls and boys were able to continue learning. Indian photographer Sourav Das has captured scenes from the everyday life of this unusually creative and lovable village school. According to UNICEF, 1.6 billion children were unable to attend school at the height of the global lockdown.

The third prize: Open wounds

If a father no longer has any arms, if war has taken his legs - what does that mean for his children? Some of the Kurdish girls and boys in Iraq portrayed by photographer Younes Mohammad are still babies. In some cases, they are simply too young to be traumatized by the scars of war, but they are already part of the story of their fathers, who have fought against the terrorists of the Islamic State (IS), have been mutilated by mines, snipers or in open battle. Mohammad has portrayed the great strength of children when it comes to dealing with the fates of their families, to accepting the disabilities of their fathers, to loving and to smiling.

The jury also awarded honorable mentions to nine other photo series:

- **Ali Haj Suleiman**, Syria, photo series: The shells of war (Syria)
- **Emily Garthwaite**, UK, photo series: Children of the Zagros (Iran)
- **Emeke Obanor**, Nigeria, photo series: The happiness of learning (Nigeria)
- **Feli & Pepita von Ehrenfeld**, Germany, photo series: Lockdown thoughts (Germany, Switzerland, Singapore)
- **Gordon Welters**, Germany, photo series: Two hearts for Clara (Germany)
- **Jörg Volland**, Germany, photo series: Brave little butterfly (Germany)
- **Matilde Simas**, USA, photo series: Bringing mobility to children with limb loss (Philippines, Ethiopia, Haiti)
- **Natalya Saprunova**, Russia/France, photo series: Uliana, who came in from the cold (Russia)
- **Toby Binder**, Germany, photo series: Being poor in Duisburg (Germany)

UNICEF Photo of the Year

For the 22nd consecutive year, UNICEF Germany has held the international competition UNICEF Photo of the Year. It honors photos and photo series by professional photojournalists that document the personalities and circumstances of children in an outstanding way. To take part in the competition, photographers need to be nominated by an internationally renowned photography expert. An independent jury decided the winner of the 'UNICEF Photo of the Year'. For more information, go to www.unicef.de/foto.

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