

UNICEF Photo of the Year 2023

A light amidst the darkness

Berlin/Cologne, 12-21-2023 // The UNICEF Photo of the Year 2023 shows a moment of lightheartedness in a meadow somewhere in the northwest of Ukraine, that banishes the dark clouds of misery, for a while at least. Five-year-old Alina is practicing riding her bike, followed by her friends. The night before, a drone strike set fire to an oil depot nearby. This year's winning photo by Polish photographer Patryk Jaracz is a symbol of children's resilience and joy that break through the darkness of global wars, conflicts, and disasters like a ray of light.

The second prize is awarded to a picture taken by German photographer Oliver Weiken for his photo series on child labor. He documents the situation of boys in Afghanistan who crawl a hundred meters or more into the mountains of Chinarak, north of Kabul, to mine coal. Russian-born photographer Natalya Saprunova was awarded third prize for her photo series on the children of the indigenous Evenki people. In it, she documents the changes to childhood in Yakutia/Siberia.

“It is children like five-year-old Alina and her friends who give us hope and a reason to be optimistic about the future,” said Elke Büdenbender, patroness of UNICEF Germany, at the award ceremony in Berlin. “In the face of all the bad news, we owe it to children around the world to do everything we can to create some good news together and improve the sometimes dire living conditions of children. So that children everywhere can grow up in peace and dignity.”

“The UNICEF Photos of the Year confront us with the reality of life for girls and boys all over the world”, said Peter-Matthias Gaede, a member of the jury and the German Committee for UNICEF. “We see moments of individual lightheartedness. And the opposite of a safe childhood. We see bravery. And misery. We see children as victims of structural violence, poverty, and a lack of rights. We see distressing images that pull at our heartstrings.”

“The worldwide situation has certainly become more complex and complicated than it was at the start of this competition 24 years ago”, explained Prof. Klaus Honnef, chairman of the jury. “What remains may be the fact that the children of the world are one thing above all: they are children – no matter where and under what circumstances they live. The winning pictures document this elementary strength and confidence of the girls and boys.”

The winning picture: Under the dark clouds of war

Polish photographer and documentary filmmaker Patryk Jaracz has been documenting events on the ground in Ukraine since the start of the war. In doing so, he has captured such rare moments as the one we see in the winning picture. Five-year-old Alina is practicing riding her bike, followed by her friends. A moment of lightheartedness in a meadow somewhere in the northwest of Ukraine, that banishes the dark clouds of misery, for a while at least. The night before, a drone strike set fire to an oil depot nearby.

This time it was just an oil depot, not a residential building, not a hospital, not a school. The war in Ukraine, which broke out in February 2022, does not overshadow every day and every place in this large country, so that it could utterly destroy the simple joys, needs, and resilience of its children. This can be seen in this stunning picture by Polish photographer

Patryk Jaracz. However, he also repeatedly documents the mental and physical injuries suffered by Ukrainian children.

In eastern and southern Ukraine in particular, children and young people are repeatedly caught in the crossfire. Their homes are destroyed, they witness unfathomable violence, have to leave their homes from one second to the next in search of safety, and they lose parents, relatives, or friends. The onset of winter only exacerbates their misery. Approx. 4 million people have been displaced within Ukraine. More than seven million Ukrainian children are in need of humanitarian aid. In many places, in-person school attendance is no longer possible due to the attacks.

The second prize: In the holes of Chinarak

They have no helmets, gloves, or safety glasses when crawling a hundred meters or more into the mountains of Chinarak. There are also no measuring devices for toxic gases. The supporting beams in the tunnels are makeshift, the air is heavy, the ground treacherous. And some of the boys who mine coal in the mountains north of Kabul for the equivalent of a few euros a day are only ten years old.

There has always been child labor in Afghanistan. However, since the victory of the Taliban and the resulting decline in international aid, and because of failed harvests and droughts, more and more families have been forced to make even their underage sons work for a living. In hardly any other country in the world are children's rights, as defined by the United Nations, so far removed from being realized. In his photo series about the boys from Chinarak, German photographer Oliver Weiken documents this situation with his impressive images. At the same time, he shows the strength and resilience that the affected children are forced to display.

The third prize: The children from the great cold forest

The photo series by Russian-born photographer Natalya Saprunova documents how childhood has changed for the children of the indigenous Evenki people. They were once alone with their reindeer herds in the tundra and forests of Yakutia, in north-eastern Siberia. Back then, Moscow was not important to the indigenous Evenki people. Then came the geologists and prospectors in search of gold, diamonds, and other abundant mineral resources. And finally came the lumberjacks. The lives of the Evenki people have changed considerably since then. Many nomads have settled down, industrial plants have cut across the migratory paths of the reindeer, missionaries compete against the traditional shamanism.

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

- **Michael Löwa**, Germany, photo series: Johannes' four-legged sister (Germany)
- **Robin Hammond**, New Zealand/UK, photo series: USA: What is happening to me? (USA)
- **Tommy Trenchard**, UK, photo series: Sinking into the sea piece by piece (Sierra Leone)
- **Justin Jin**, China/Belgium, photo series: The high-achieving child (China)
- **Supratim Bhattacharjee**, India, photo series: The fate of the little water carriers (India)
- **Atefeh Alsadat Safavi Vanani**, Iran, photo series: The power of reading (Iran)
- **Fabio Bucciarelli**, Italy, photo series: The enemy inside (Ukraine)

An exhibition of all award-winning works can be seen until the end of January 2024 at the *Haus der Bundespressekonferenz* in Berlin. The photos will then be on display for the general public at the *Willy Brandt Haus* as of February 2, 2024.

UNICEF Photo of the Year

For the 24th 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 overview of all of the award-winning photo series can be found at www.unicef.de/photo.

Editorial service

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- » Information and photos on the UNICEF photo competition in our digital press kit
- » Interview with the award winner Patryk Jaracz

All information about the UNICEF Photo of the Year 2023 competition can also be found on our social media channels. Follow us!

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