UNICEF Germany – Photo of the Year 2020

First Prize 2020

Lesbos, Greece: The flames of misery

It was a catastrophe within a catastrophe: On September 9, 2020, the refugee camp Moria on the Greek island of Lesbos burned to the ground leaving 13,000 people, including 4,000 children, without shelter. They had fled the war in Syria, the violence in Afghanistan, the fear in Iraq. They endured appalling living conditions, many of them for years. The camp was hopelessly overcrowded, diseases ran rampant, food and clean water were regularly in short supply. And then came the flames. With the fire rapidly spreading, the only option left for the refugees was to grab whatever they can and run. Among the many pictures of this inferno, the most impressive images of the children’s suffering were taken by Greek photographer Angelos Tzortzinis. Images of children with breathing masks, walking hand in hand through clouds of smoke. Images of moments of shock and collapse, of horror and crying. And the photo that shows escape and bravery, disbelief and the readiness to help others in dire need, all in one single image. The strength of a young boy saving an even younger one. The young savior’s eyes full of hope that another, better life may come. According to UN estimates, there are currently around 79.5 million refugees worldwide, including approx. 32 million children and young people.

Photographer: Angelos Tzortzinis, Greece (AFP)
Second Prize 2020

India: The curse of coal

The Jharia coal fields in the Indian state of Jharkhand are among the largest in Asia. On an area of 280 square kilometers, coal is extracted here in open pit mining. It is the land of blackened faces. A poisonous land. For over 100 years, the toxic gases sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide have been rising here from countless underground fires. Air and drinking water are polluted, asthma, tuberculosis and skin diseases are widespread. Nevertheless, people continue to endure it here, even moving here in search of work. And children too have to work in the open mines, hauling stones. In the faces of these children, Indian photographer Supratim Bhattacharjee has captured all their misery: horror, exhaustion, destruction. Scenes that could have sprung from a dystopian movie; it is hard to forget these faces. Their parents are mostly illiterate. The wages in the often illegally operated mines on the edge of the large coal fields, the equivalent of one to two US dollars per day, are so low that even four, five or six-year-olds are forced to work. Many girls and boys are malnourished and don’t attend school.

Photographer: Supratim Bhattacharjee, India

© Supratim Bhattacharjee, India
Third Prize 2020

Brazil: The favela ballet

Being confronted with violence and drugs or falling pregnant at an early age is part of the everyday experiences of children and young people in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. But now a group made up of members of some of the best dance academies in Brazil has decided to come up with an alternative: They started a ballet school in the Manguinhos favela to show 250 girls and young women a way out of their daily misery - through joy, play and discipline and by providing them with new self-confidence. The school includes a library and four times a month the students can visit the impressive Teatro Municipal, where the girls have the chance of a personal encounter with their idols. The Russian photographer Evgeny Makarov, who lives in Germany, accompanied the ballet students of Manguinhos on their ways through the favela, during training at school, which he describes as a “protective bunker”, during training at home, where they practice their ‘Arabesque’ and ‘Grand Plié’ in poor surroundings - and in a community that makes them happy.

Photographer: Evgeny Makarov, Germany/Russia (Agentur Focus)

© Evgeny Makarov, Germany/Russia (Agentur Focus)
Honorable Mention 2020

Syria: Sport and fun instead of war and fear
In the Syrian village of Aljiina near the city of Aleppo, Wasim Satot has opened a karate school for children. What makes it special is that girls and boys with and without disabilities are taught together. They are between six and 15 years old. With his school, Satot wants to create a sense of community and overcome any war experiences - Aleppo was fiercely contested - in the minds of the children. Syrian photographer Anas Alkharboutli has documented how successful the karate teacher’s plan has been to make children happy, strong and self-confident; to promote their resistance and enable them to lead a carefree life, if only for a few hours.

Photographer: Anas Alkharboutli, Syria (dpa)
Honorable Mention 2020

Italy: The ragazzi of Catania

Catania, Sicily. In the ‘problem areas’ of this city, both the school dropout rate and the crime rate are high. Many young people here live off theft and drug dealing, supporting their mothers when their fathers are “attaccato”, i.e. in prison. Family bonds are still strong here and, as the Italian photographer Daniele Vita states, are not unlike the “respect” laws of the mafia culture that is still very much alive in the area. It is almost regarded as normal to live a life between freedom and prison. Vita accompanied young people from notorious neighborhoods, the so-called “Quatteri”, in taking their first steps towards adulthood: Ten to 15-year-olds who meet at the cliffs by the sea to try many things for the first time: first cigarettes, first drugs, first kisses, first sex. They have often experienced violence, some have even held a weapon in their hands - yet they are still children. They want to go with the flow, but where will the current take them?

Photographer: Daniele Vita, Italy
Honorable Mention 2020

Russia: From the school of life to the state school

They are born in the cold, grow up in tents and move around with their parents on reindeer sledges: The children of the Nenets, one of the 44 indigenous peoples on Russian territory, grow up in great freedom. Their people live as nomads in the extreme northwest of Russia. The children know neither heating nor electricity; they get their water from melting snow and a generator provides them with electricity for two to three hours a day. But when they turn seven, helicopters land to take the Nenet children to a state school. For nine months every year. Until they are 17. The school is free of charge. But especially unusual for the children, who at first do not speak Russian and have to walk a tightrope between two cultures. Russian photographer Elena Chernyshova has accompanied the reindeer herders’ children in both worlds: in the tundra and in the city; wrapped in skins and doing gymnastics at school; under the big sky - and under the observation of their teachers.

Photographer: Elena Chernyshova, Russia/France (Panos Pictures)
Honorable Mention 2020

Iran: Corona – a piece of freedom on the rooftop
Closed kindergartens and schools, collapsing health systems, fathers and mothers released into unemployment, aggravated misery: The global coronavirus pandemic has had disastrous consequences for millions of children, especially in poorer countries. Places where distancing rules are a mere theory and protective masks are a luxury, where self-isolation is to be practiced in tiny dwellings, where people have to travel in crammed trains and buses instead of cars. In the Iranian capital of Tehran, photographer Erfan Kouchari has captured somewhat friendlier scenes from a country in times of Corona. A country where almost 50,000 people died of Covid-19 by December 2020, despite imposed lockdowns. Kouchari shows how the children escape onto the flat roofs of their houses, how they use these spaces to play, skate, fly kites, do gymnastics, build tents or plant gardens.

Photographer: Erfan Kouchari, Iran (Tasnim News Agency)
Honorable Mention 2020

Iran: One heart, two lives
About 25,000 people in Iran are on the waiting list for donor organs. According to official statistics, almost 1,000 transplants were performed in 2018. The hidden dramas behind these numbers usually go unnoticed by the public. One of these stories, in which beauty and pain lie close together, has been captured by Iranian photographer Hamed Malekpour. It is the story of Sajjad Darwishali, a nine-year-old boy who was fatally injured after being run over on the street in his home town. After being declared brain dead, his family decided to donate both his heart and liver, the cornea of his eyes and his kidneys to people in dire need. Sajjad’s heart was successfully transplanted to a ten-year-old boy in Tehran who had been suffering from an arterial disease for four years, which led to a life-threatening myocardial disease. Malekpour captured the fate of two children and their families in images of great sorrow and equally great relief.

Photographer: Hamed Malekpour, Iran
Honorable Mention 2020

Colombia: Fleeing Venezuela

Largely unnoticed by the global public, people have been fleeing from the crisis state of Venezuela to neighboring Colombia since 2016: from political insecurity and violence, from hunger and a health system in a state of collapse. According to UNICEF estimates, the number of refugees has grown to 1.7 million, including over 430,000 children and young people. Colombian organizations provide a kind of first aid at the border, distributing food, drinking water and medicines. The majority of the refugees, however, try to reach the capital Bogotá, or to continue on to Ecuador. They embark on adventurous journeys on foot, some manage to travel on top of trucks. Italian photographer Nicoló Filippo Rosso, who currently lives in Colombia, has captured one such scene: children transported in a truck that normally carries coal.

Photographer: Nicoló Filippo Rosso, Italy
Honorable Mention 2020

Bangladesh: The streets are their bed
No roof over their heads, no school, no access to health care and a family that no longer provides them with shelter and protection: In the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka, children live day and night on sidewalks, sleep on benches, pieces of cardboard, bamboo mats. Or by the river, next to four-lane roads, in front of train stations, in the grounds of factories. Sometimes they have an old blanket between them and the pavement, sometimes a pillow of rags. It is difficult to estimate the number of street children in Bangladesh, but there are probably hundreds of thousands. According to estimates, almost half of them are not even ten years old. Their number will also continue to rise due to the continuing influx of impoverished families from rural areas. These children earn their money with errands, as garbage collectors and day laborers. They try to survive as beggars and pickpockets. In this city of 20 million inhabitants, photographer Sumon Yusuf walked the streets at night to document what he calls “sleeping beauty”. Yusuf sees this poetic title as an appeal to be aware of the dignity and bravery of children in the gutter.

Photographer: Sumon Yusuf, Bangladesh

© Sumon Yusuf, Bangladesh

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