UNICEF Photo of the Year 2020

Braving the flames of misery

Cologne/Berlin, 12-22-2020 // The UNICEF Photo of the Year 2020 shows the exodus of children from the burning refugee camp Moria on the Greek island of Lesbos. The winning image by Greek photographer Angelos Tzortzinis is a frozen moment in time that captures the bravery and disbelief of children and their readiness to help others in the face of utmost adversity.

The second and third prize pictures in UNICEF Germany’s international competition also capture stories of children in distressing and extraordinary circumstances. The photo series by Indian photographer Supratim Bhattacharjee on working children in Asia’s largest coalfields has won the second prize. In his photo series from Brazil, German-Russian photographer Evgeny Makarov shows a ballet school as an answer to violence and drugs in the everyday life of children in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. For this, he has been awarded the third prize.

“The UNICEF Photo of the Year 2020 is a powerful appeal to all of us. It tells of a drama right on our doorstep. The image confronts us with our human duty: as Europeans, we must finally find an answer - also for the children of Moria. Together, we must do more to bring hope into their lives, too”, explained Elke Büdenbender, patroness of UNICEF Germany.

“The year 2020 has brought an escalation of disasters for many girls and boys around the world,” said Peter Matthias Gaede, vice chairman of UNICEF Germany. “The images from this year’s competition show what it means to have to flee from a refugee camp, to be threatened by the Corona pandemic in already appalling living conditions, to be physically and mentally destroyed by child labor. Their message is clear: Let’s help the children!”

“Covid-19 has significantly limited the working environments of photo reporters. It almost became impossible to travel. Nevertheless, a number of remarkable pictures and photo series were submitted to the jury of the UNICEF Photo of the Year 2020. Often taken by local photographers in the crisis areas of the world,” said Jury Chairman, Prof. Klaus Honnef. “The jury honored ten outstanding photo series of children whose lives are shaped by a wide variety of constraints and challenges.”

The winning picture: The flames of misery

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. The refugees and migrants who lived there came from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq. The inhabitants of the camp had to live under appalling conditions for years: Overcrowded, hardly any clean water, not enough food, no roof over their heads, no schools or play opportunities. Greek photographer Angelos Tzortzinis captured a moment that shows bravery, disbelief and the readiness to help others in dire need, all in one single image. According to UNICEF estimates, almost half of the world’s refugees or displaced persons are children or adolescents.
The second prize: The curse of coal
The Jharia coal fields in the Indian state of Jharkhand are among the largest in Asia. Over an area of 280 square kilometers, coal is extracted here in open pit mining, often by children. Indian photographer Supratim Bhattacharjee has captured all the misery, horror, exhaustion and destruction in the faces of these children. Toxic gases, polluted air and contaminated drinking water are characteristic of the dangerous environment of these coal fields. The daily wage is the equivalent of one to two US dollars. Many girls and boys are malnourished, thousands don't attend school.

The third prize: The favela ballet
Members of one of Brazil’s best dance academies decided to provide an alternative to the often hopeless living conditions in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. They started a ballet school in the Manguinhos favela. 250 girls come here to experience happiness, to go to school and to make trips to the Teatro Municipal. 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, and in a community that makes them happy.

The jury also awarded honorable mentions to seven other photo series:
- Anas Alkharboutli, Syria (dpa), photo series: Sport and fun instead of war and fear (Syria)
- Daniele Vita, Italy, photo series: The ragazzi of Catania (Italy)
- Elena Chernyshova, Russia/France (Panos Pictures), photo series: From the school of life to the state school (Russia)
- Erfan Kouchari, Iran (Tasnim News Agency), photo series: Corona – a piece of freedom on the rooftop (Iran)
- Hamed Malekpour, Iran, photo series: One heart, two lives (Iran)
- Nicolò Filippo Rosso, Italy, photo series: Fleeing Venezuela (Colombia)
- Sumon Yusuf, Bangladesh, photo series: The streets are their bed (Bangladesh)

UNICEF Photo of the Year
For the 21st 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 awarded photo series can be found at www.unicef.de/foto.

Free reprint/use of the photos as well as of the related texts is only allowed within news coverage of “UNICEF Photo of the Year 2020” and including copyright information of the photographers and their agencies and of the text author.

If you have any questions, please contact the UNICEF press office: Rudi Tarneden and Katharina Kesper 0221/93650-315 or -237, email presse@unicef.de or Angela Rupprecht (Project Manager UNICEF Photo of the Year) 0173/547 53 51.