

Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the Henri Nannen Journalism Awards in honour of Hosam Katan of Aleppo, Syria, recipient of the 2016 Special Award

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29.04.2016 - Speech 

Eske Nannen, Mr Mayor, Olaf Julia Jäkel, Thomas Rabe, Christian Krug, Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by conveying best wishes from Sigmar Gabriel. He is very sorry that he cannot be here himself. His health has unfortunately got in the way of his plans.

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be here. You have already honoured a number of outstanding journalists this evening.

For special achievements that do not fit into the usual categories, STERN magazine and Gruner + Jahr publishers bestow the Henri Nannen Special Award.

It goes this year to a young photographer who has been doing his work in the most difficult circumstances you can imagine: Hosam Katan.

Just like everyone else here, I have great, great respect for what this young man has done. He has reported on life in a city, his city, which has been a war zone for years. The city of Aleppo.

Just today, right now, we are hearing yet more shocking news from Hosam Katan's home town.

A hospital in Aleppo was hit by air strikes yesterday. Many patients and staff were killed – including, according to reports from aid agencies, Muhammad Waseem Moaz, who they say was the last paediatrician left in the region.

Reports of major hostilities in Aleppo and elsewhere around the country are coming in on an almost daily basis. Let me say very clearly at this point that air strikes on Aleppo are being carried out by the Syrian regime and its supporters – not by the opposition. The Syrian Government has to decide whether it wants to participate seriously in the negotiations, or to keep on laying waste to Aleppo. This escalation is putting the political process in jeopardy. We now call on all parties to the conflict to adhere to the ceasefire.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Katan,

You once said of your work in Aleppo that fear was your constant companion – that you changed sleeping quarters every two or three days because it helped you feel safer.

I assume most of us here in this room find it hard to imagine what it means to fear for your life every single day as you live and work, and to be constantly searching for shelter in ever new places to help you feel safer.

Hosam Katan withstood all of that. He stayed in Aleppo the whole time and photographed the people in his home town.

He did this because he cares about his city and its people – because he wanted to focus his camera on the truth and let the world see that truth through his lens. And he was successful.

He once said that Aleppo was the one place where he could do something meaningful with his life.

And what he has done is certainly meaningful. He has given the world a window into a city that many of us associate only with suffering and violence these days.

Hosam Katan did his work in a situation of deadly peril, in extreme jeopardy. He did his work at a time when the world's major media organisations considered it too dangerous to keep their photographers in Aleppo.

Hosam Katan did this job even though he wasn't actually a photographer. He had been providing local knowledge and translations to help the media reporting from eastern Aleppo.

When a Reuters photographer fearing for his life left the city, he left his camera with the young Syrian.

Hosam Katan took over. He did this work, often risking his life; once, he nearly lost his life. He was shot, hit by a sniper while photographing a clash between government forces and rebels. That was in May last year. Tonight, he is here with us, healthy and safe, and we are very glad of it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

They say the first casualty of war is truth. That phrase was coined in the first half of the 20th century, but it is more relevant than ever – and particularly so in the Syria conflict, which is dominated by such a plethora of stakeholders and enmities and has become an arena for so many regional power struggles.

The first casualty of war is truth. Hosam Katan did not want to believe that; he simply refused to accept it for the people of his home town. He stood in determined opposition to that fate and, as the last photographer of Aleppo, did valuable work in the service of the truth.

Hosam Katan once said that he wanted to document what war was doing to his country – to record the every-day reality of ordinary people whose lives get caught up in the violence through no fault of their own.

He has really succeeded in that endeavour. His pictures are oppressive, full of sympathy and devoid of facile voyeurism. They show war and destruction. But they also show how people get on with their lives in exceptional circumstances and how they try to retain their dignity amid all the suffering around them.

- Schoolchildren who move their classroom into the cellar of a bombed house but still mess about and giggle like any other school kids
- Vegetable sellers offering their colourful wares at market stalls set up in front of utterly demolished buildings
- Lads leaping into a water-filled bomb crater in their swimming trunks, arms outstretched, as if they were at a pool

These people's stories tell of their misery and their pragmatism – but also their hope. They are a service to truth and, in the best sense, a service to journalism.

Reporter Egon Erwin Kisch, in whose name the best reports are recognised tonight and have been for nearly four decades, once said that truth is the most noble raw material for art and precision the best way of treating it.

This applies to Hosam Katan and his images. But the truth these images transmit is a sad, painful one: five years of civil war, hundreds of thousands of fatalities, millions of refugees, an utterly devastated homeland for Hosam Katan and many others.

Hosam Katan has often drawn a parallel between Berlin and the way his home town has been divided into a western part controlled by the regime and an eastern part controlled by the rebels.

But what German history teaches us is that new lives can be built from ruins and that division can be overcome. I am convinced that we Germans therefore have a particular responsibility to help put an end to the war in Syria and do our bit for reconstruction.

We are doing all we can to seek a political solution to the conflict. We have to do everything we can to ensure the ceasefire is re-established that we reached after weeks of negotiations in Vienna and Munich, with the difficult and unequal partners we had managed to gather around the table and finally persuade to engage in serious dialogue: Russia, Europe and the United States, and above all the regional powers Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey.

Tonight of all nights, as we contemplate the devastating images Hosam Katan has brought to a global audience from his home, we must not give in, we must not capitulate in the face of the dispiriting news still coming out of Syria. These photographs send out an appeal to all those involved in this process: shoulder your share of responsibility to finally put an end to the killing and the suffering in Syria! We owe that to people like Hosam Katan, the last photographer of Aleppo!

Mr Katan, you have ensured that the suffering of people in your homeland is not buried under the untruths of war.

We have to make sure that these people's hope for a political future is not buried in irresponsibility, power struggles and the disastrous spiral of escalation.

Your courage and your dedication, Mr Katan, should be an example to us.

Let me congratulate you most sincerely on this Henri Nannen Special Award.

I have nothing but respect for your work – congratulations!

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