

## Justice Minister's Award

### CHILD LABOUR

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One day during summer vacation, I came home from club activities and, as always, headed straight to the refrigerator. On my way, I saw a plastic file folder lying on the table in the kitchen, and I stopped. The folder bore an illustration by Dick Bruna, an author of children's books, and I'm a fan of his. The picture was of a boy, instead of the rabbit named Miffy I've been familiar with since I was a little girl. "Wow he's cute," I thought. As I picked up the folder, I noticed a large droplet below one of the eyes of the boy illustrated in the center of the folder. It was a teardrop. "What? Why is it he crying?" I wondered and took a closer look at the picture. The crying boy held a few yellow rectangles that looked like boards. "What?" I didn't instantly understand what the picture represented. Then I read the English words written right above him in red block letters: "STOP! CHILD LABOUR." I had learned the word "child" in my English class at school, so I knew what it means. But I had no idea what the next word "labour" is. I thought I had to find out right away why this boy was crying, so I rushed to the next room to get an English-Japanese dictionary on the bookshelf. Back in the kitchen, I looked up the word. The dictionary defined "labour" as: 1. Work 2. Workers 3. To work. It also gave the more detailed definition, "backbreaking work." The images of the cute boy in the picture and of the shocking word "labour" collided in my head. An extremely uncomfortable feeling and indefinable sense of pathos filled my heart.

I brought a glass of cold juice to my room, turned on my tablet, and typed the address on the back of the folder into the address bar of the browser. The website overflowed with news and articles about many different problems related to human rights around the world. I was stunned. "Oh my, there are so many human rights problems!" On the website, these issues were sorted by country or subject, and I could pick articles from those lists. I, of course, tapped on "Child Labour" for starters. The page opened to show a photo of an innocent-looking boy staring at the camera while trying to lift something. I continued to scroll down to find a photo of children in torn sandals or bare feet crouching on rubble while doing something. They didn't look like children of the same age doing something fun together. None of them were smiling. With their lips pursed together, they looked bored or even angry. I read the caption beside the photo, and was stunned again: these children were sorting rare metals needed to produce electronics such as tablets—like the one I was using to visit the website—as well as cell phones, smart

phones, and home video game consoles. What looked like “rubble” to me was in fact ore that contains a rare metal called cobalt.

Whenever I want to find out about something, my tablet allows me to search the web for information and images. It was a Christmas present from my parents and I love it. But somewhere deep in it, this tablet might contain the rare metal that these innocent children dug out with their small hands—in a harsh work environment where they are covered with dust in blistering heat, risking their lives. “This tablet must have been made at a clean, dust-free, and organized precision equipment factory in a faraway place, and polished and displayed at a neat store where music is played before it came to me”—this was what I had vaguely imagined until I learned about these children, and I felt really ashamed of myself.

I finally understood the reasons for the bored and angry looks on the faces of these children with pursed lips, and for the boy’s large teardrop on the file folder.

According to the online article, the mine in the photo is in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, located in Central Africa, and the country is one of the world’s largest exporters of raw minerals. The country’s rare metals can generate great wealth, and conflicts over the raw minerals have triggered civil wars that have continued for decades. Today, the Congo is one of the world’s poorest nations.

This saddened and angered me at the same time. These are children with futures who have been made victims of poverty caused by conflicts between adults—children just like us.