

AFRICA

Leila Alaoui, Photographer Wounded in Burkina Faso Siege, Dies at 33

By DAN BILEFSKY JAN. 19, 2016

Leila Alaoui, a French-Moroccan photographer whose hauntingly beautiful photographs explored themes of migration, cultural identity and displacement, died on Monday night from injuries sustained during a terrorist attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. She was 33.

The French culture minister, Fleur Pellerin, confirmed her death on Twitter.

Ms. Alaoui, whose work has been displayed around the world, was described as one of the most promising photographers of her generation by Jean-Luc Monterosso, director of the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris.

“There was an internal light that illuminated both her and her work,” he said.

She was wounded when gunmen opened fire at a hotel and at the Cappuccino Cafe on Friday. Ms. Alaoui was shot in the leg and thorax while parked outside the cafe, Amnesty International said in a statement. She had a heart attack after she was taken to a hospital in Ouagadougou.

The North African affiliate of Al Qaeda has claimed responsibility for the rampage, which killed at least 30 people and wounded dozens more.

Ms. Alaoui had been on assignment in Burkina Faso for Amnesty International for less than a week, working on a series of photographs focused on women’s rights.

Photographie and the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, the Marrakesh Biennial in Morocco and Art Dubai, and at exhibitions and galleries in New York, Argentina, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland. Her photos have also appeared in The New York Times and Vogue.

Ms. Alaoui was born in Paris in 1982 and grew up in Marrakesh. She studied photography at the City University of New York before spending time in Morocco, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates.

She had been living in Marrakesh and Beirut, Lebanon, according to the website of the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris, which recently displayed a series of hers titled “The Moroccans,” part of a celebration of photographs from the Arab world, which featured characteristically intimate portraits of men and women in traditional outfits from different ethnic groups and from remote parts of the country.

Writing about the exhibition on the museum’s website, Ms. Alaoui said she had been determined to avoid the exoticism that sometimes infected postcolonial portrayals of Morocco and the Arab world.

Ms. Alaoui said she was influenced by the American photographer Robert Frank, who traveled across the United States in the 1950s recording life there with unsparing honesty.

Describing her approach to “The Moroccans” in a recent interview with the news channel France 24, she said she never posed her models. “I set up my studio outside, during market days,” she said. “The people passed by, and those who wanted stopped to have their photo taken. The only thing I asked of them was to face me.”

In a joint statement, Mr. Monterosso and Jack Lang, a former French minister of culture who is now president of the Institut du Monde Arabe, hailed Ms. Alaoui as a champion of the downtrodden and the dispossessed.

“She was fighting to give life to those forgotten by society, to homeless people, to migrants, deploying one weapon: photography,” they said.

Samira Daoud, Amnesty International’s deputy regional director for west and central Africa, said Amnesty had chosen Ms. Alaoui to create portraits in Burkina

Faso because of her ability to make “faces talk” without turning her subjects into victims.

Aida Alami, a journalist who was a childhood friend of hers and later her roommate in New York, said Ms. Alaoui was fearless.

“I saw her before she left for Burkina Faso, and she said, ‘Don’t worry, I have been to more dangerous places,’ ” she said. “She was so optimistic, she thought that nothing bad could ever happen to her.”

Ms. Alami recalled that while, on assignment in Rabat a few years ago, she told Ms. Alaoui that she wanted to interview some migrants.

Ms. Alaoui, who was chronicling the plight of sub-Saharan immigrants there, invited Ms. Alami to come join her to meet some. Arriving at Ms. Alaoui’s home, she found her surrounded by 40 migrants. She was cooking them dinner.

Caroline Chauvet contributed reporting.

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