

## Sebastian's Experience Report from Early March 2022:

*After a 4.5-hour drive from Chiang Mai in one of the typical minibuses of Thailand, I arrived exhausted and drenched at my accommodation in Mae Sariang, located in the remote Mae Hong Son province. Despite having traveled extensively in the past years, this was my first time exploring this less touristy part of Thailand. The next morning, Pam, the CEO of DARE Network, picked me up, and together we drove to the office, where I had the opportunity to meet the rest of the team. They warmly welcomed me and patiently answered all my questions. After a freshly prepared meal and the good feeling of having met not only friendly but also impactful people, I returned to my accommodation to prepare for the next day.*



Office Team DARE Network



Sebastian at DARE's office

*Due to the COVID situation, the Thai government had prohibited outsiders from entering the Mae La refugee camp during my visit. However, to gain a small and direct impression and at least perceive the situation from the outside, we set off early the next morning towards the Mae La camp. I am very grateful to Pam and her colleague Law La Say for taking on this effort.*

*The 170 km route took us through mountainous and densely forested terrain, following the Moei River, which separates Thailand from Myanmar. A brief stop at the riverbank starkly reminded me that just a stone's throw away, there is war, and people are fleeing because of it. It was a strange, unsettling feeling.*



Staff at northern Thai rest stop



Stop over at border river Moei

*After more than three hours of driving and passing several military security checkpoints, we finally reached the outer border of the Mae La camp. Previously, I had only seen images of refugee camps on television. What awaited me on the right side of the road, however, was far from what I had imagined. From the roadside up the sprawling hillside, there was a vast array of makeshift wooden huts set against the lush green backdrop of nature. Images of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro came to mind. The barbed wire fence and the presence of armed checkpoints every 300 meters quickly made me realize that this was a place where freedom is a foreign concept and security is an unwritten rule. To avoid any complications with the guards but still capture personal*



along the external border of Mae La



simply built accomodations

*As armed soldiers patrolled the road on motorcycles at regular intervals, we had a limited amount of time to stop near the treatment center and engage in conversation with the DARE camp staff. Law La Say, a native Karen, assisted me with communication, and I learned that there were 30 "clients" in treatment at the time of my visit. I was closely observed by many eyes from faces marked by life's struggles. More and more of the mostly male clients entered the courtyard to see what was happening on the other side of the fence. There I stood, at the fence, trying to grasp the daily lives of people who fight against despair and addiction every day. I am generally an open and humorous person, but at that moment, my thoughts froze, and I was starkly reminded of how incredibly fortunate we are to be part of our society. The camp leader from DARE apologized for not being able to allow us inside the center and expressed a desire to personally guide me and show me everything. This heartfelt approach and openness deeply reassured me that I was in the right place to help.*

*In conversation, I learned that about 50,000 people live in the camp, which covers only 6x6 km, and that DARE oversees a total of three refugee camps. Through Pam, a trained addiction therapist, I gained new insights into traditional Burmese medicine, which plays a significant role in the treatment at the center. A door that had been closed to me until then opened for the first time. As the time until the next motorized patrol approached, we were eventually forced to say goodbye. I gazed for a long time into the faces we had to leave behind.*



conversation at the treatment centre



on the way along the Camp