

# CHARTING THE EXODUS FROM SHAN STATE



Patterns of Shan refugee flow  
into northern Chiang Mai province of Thailand  
1997-2002

THE SHAN HUMAN RIGHTS FOUNDATION, 2003

## SUMMARY

This report gives quantitative evidence in support of claims that there has been a large influx of Shans arriving into northern Thailand during the past 6 years who are genuine refugees fleeing persecution and not simply migrant workers. This data was based on interviews with 66,868 Shans arriving in Fang District of northern Chiang Mai province between June 1997 and December 2002,

The data shows that almost all the new arrivals came from the twelve townships in Central Shan State where the Burmese military regime has carried out a mass forced relocation program since March 1996, and where the regime's troops have been perpetrating systematic human rights abuses against civilian populations.

Higher numbers of arrivals came from townships such as Kunhing where a higher incidence of human rights abuses has been reported. Evidence also shows increases in refugee outflows from specific village tracts directly after large-scale massacres were committed by the regime's troops.

The consistently high flows of new arrivals recorded between 1997 and 2002, ranging between approximately 8,000 and 15,000 each year, are much higher than the annual influx of Shan migrant workers into Fang prior to 1996, which according to estimates of local residents did not exceed approximately 4,000. The monthly totals show that there is no seasonal pattern to the inflows, unlike for migrant workers, who prior to 1996 would mostly come from Shan State to work in Thailand during the dry season months of January to May.

47 % of the arrivals are 17 years and under, or 45 years and over; in other words they are fleeing as entire families, unlike typical migrant workers. There are also almost equal numbers of men and women. Prior to 1996, according to Fang residents, most migrant workers from Shan State would be adult men between the age of 20-40, who would come to Thailand without dependents in order to work and save money.

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## **Introduction**

This report analyzes data collected from a total of 66,868 Shans entering Fang district of northern Chiang Mai province between June 1997 and December 2002. The aim is to provide evidence to show that the high numbers of Shans fleeing to Thailand since 1996 are genuine refugees fleeing persecution and not simply migrant workers.

The data was collected by members of a local Shan organisation in different locations in Fang district of Chiang Mai province. They interviewed new Shan refugee arrivals in their areas, documenting the following data:

- name
- age
- sex
- date of arrival in Thailand
- village, village tract, township of origin
- stated reason for coming to Thailand

Interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis, and in some cases new arrivals did not want to be interviewed, mostly because of fear for their security in Thailand. It is estimated that up to 40% of new arrivals were not interviewed.

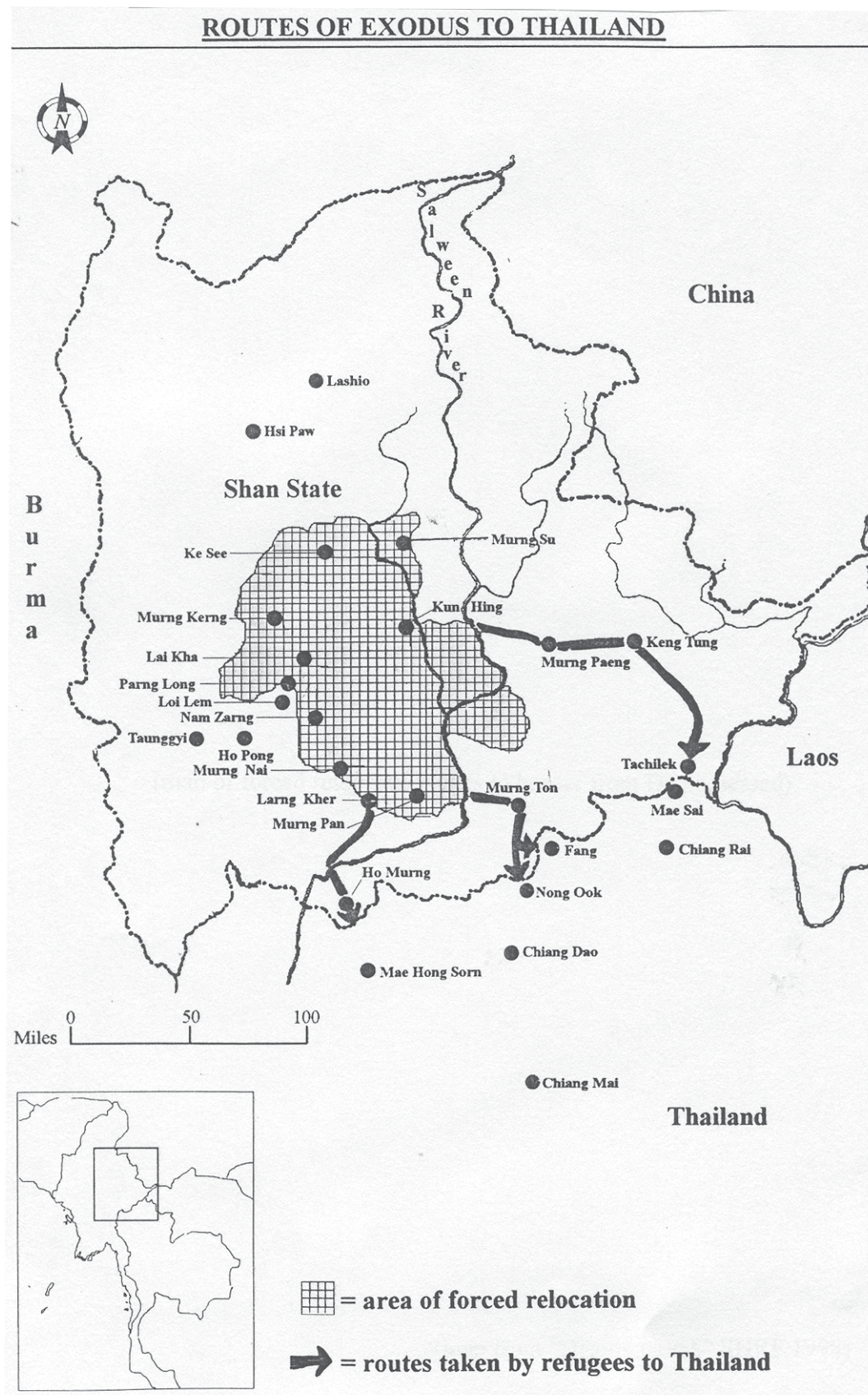
The data was collated each month and then stored by the Shan Human Rights Foundation. During 2002, the data collected between July 1997 and December 2001 was entered into a computer data-base. The detailed data for 2002 has not yet been entered into the data base, but the monthly totals are available.

## **Background**

Civil war has been continuing in Shan State for over four decades, causing displacement among various communities. However, prior to 1996, there was no large-scale refugee influx from Shan State to Thailand. This was mainly because the Shan border areas adjacent to Thailand are sparsely populated, so even when fighting occurred close to the border, there were few villagers displaced. Most refugees arriving from Shan State were thus able to be assimilated into Thai border communities.

The situation changed in 1996, with the surrender of the Shan Mong Tai Army, and the launching of an unprecedented mass forced relocation program by the Burmese regime in Central Shan State, aimed at cutting off civilian support for the newly-formed Shan State Army-South. Over 300,000 villagers from over 1,400 villages were forced from their homes into strategic relocation sites, guarded by the regime's troops (For further details, see the report "Dispossessed" by the Shan Human Rights Foundation, 1998). Those caught outside the relocation sites were shot on sight, tortured or raped. Deprived of their lands and livelihood, forced to work without pay by the military, and constantly fearful of torture or execution on suspicion of supporting the Shan resistance, many of these villagers ended up fleeing to Thailand.





(map from "Dispossessed," SHRF 1998)

In April 1996, large numbers of Shan refugees from the areas of forced relocation started arriving in Thailand. By May 1996, already an estimated 20,000 refugees had fled to Thailand. The flow of refugees continued, until by March 1998, it was estimated that about 80,000 refugees had fled to Thailand (Dispossessed, SHRF, 1998). In June 2002, SHRF and SWAN estimated the total of Shan refugees in Thailand to have reached over 150,000 since 1996.

However, despite repeated appeals from Shan organisations based in Thailand, the refugees from Shan State have never been recognised by the Thai government. Till today, unlike on the Karen and Karenni borders, there are no official refugee camps on the Shan border. As a result, Shan refugees have been forced to survive as migrant workers, mostly illegally, and therefore constantly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and liable to deportation at any time.

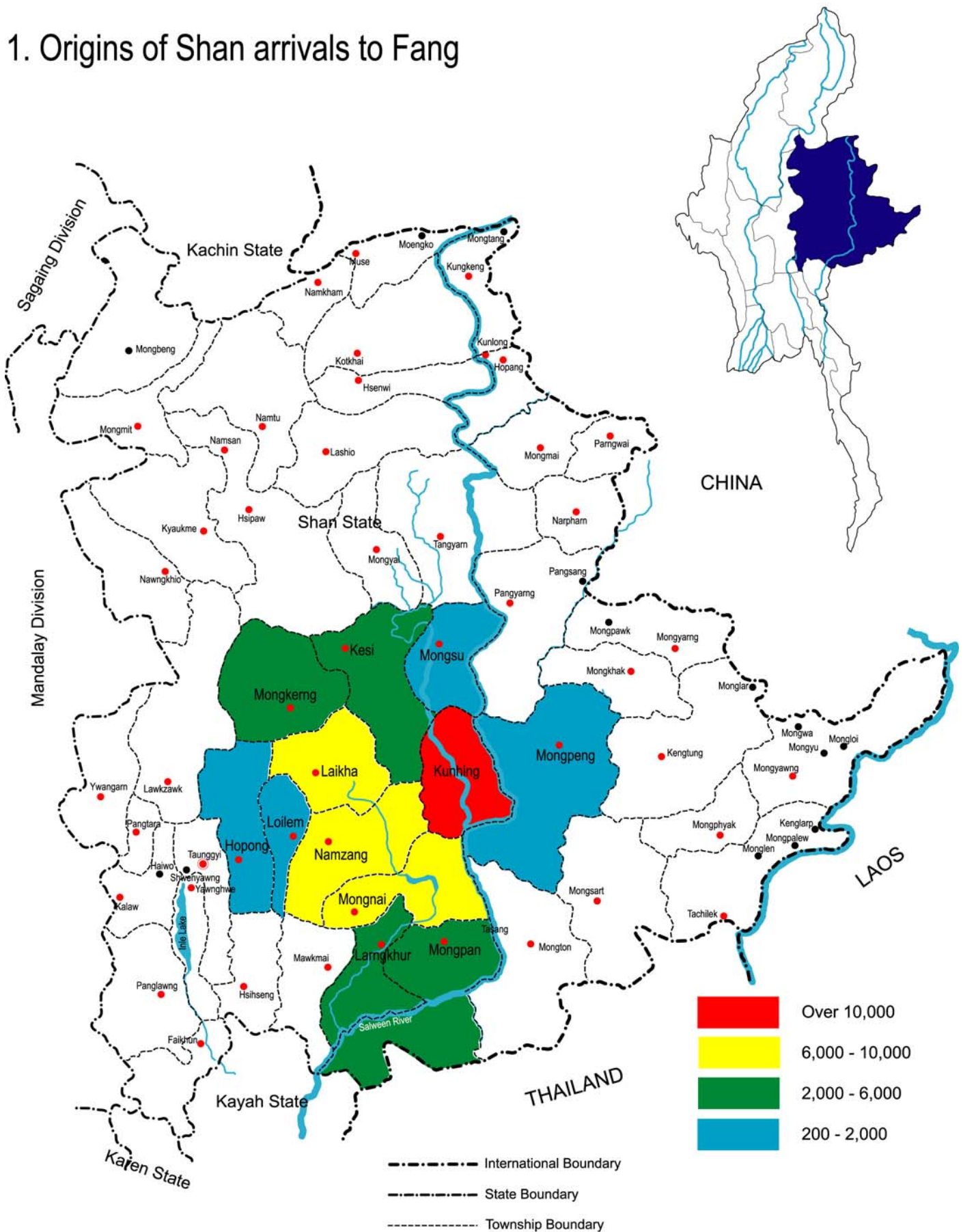
### **Fang District**

Fang district of northern Chiang Mai province is where the majority (an estimated 60%) of Shan refugees have initially headed on arrival in Thailand. This is mainly because Fang and its adjoining districts lie in an area of intensive agriculture, where there is a high demand for wage labour, mainly in the rapidly expanding orange industry. There were also ready established routes and networks of contacts for seasonal migrant labourers from Shan State, so new refugee arrivals had a high chance of finding work immediately to support themselves.



# ANALYSIS OF REFUGEE DATA

## 1. Origins of Shan arrivals to Fang

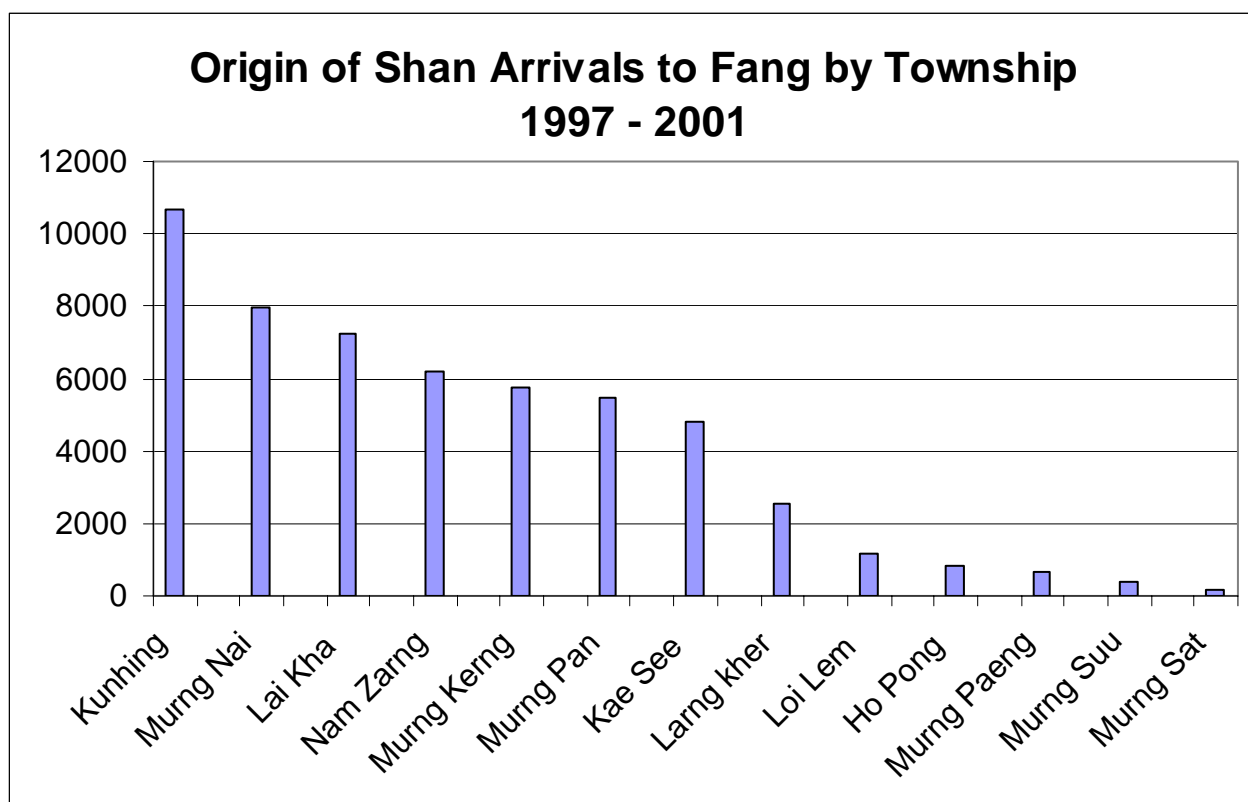


The map on the preceding page and the graph below show that the new arrivals are almost entirely from the areas of Central Shan State where the 1996-1998 forced relocation program took place, and where the SPDC has been perpetrating systematic human rights abuses in order to prevent the local population from supporting the Shan resistance. The fact that the arrivals are not coming from other parts of Shan State provides strong evidence that they are refugees fleeing as a direct result of the SPDC's anti-insurgency campaign, and not simply migrant workers.

Although one might have expected more people to flee from townships closer to the Thai border, it can be seen that proximity to the Thai border is not a major factor in determining whether refugees flee to Thailand. In fact, it appears that intensity of repression by the regime has been the determining factor in causing refugees to flee.

For example, the highest number of new arrivals have come from the township of Kunhing, which is notorious as the township where the regime's troops have employed extremely brutal anti-insurgency tactics against local civilians. For example, during 1997, out of a total of 664 extrajudicial killings of civilians by the SLORC/SPDC recorded by SHRF, 314 were committed in Kunhing township; this included massacres of civilians, including women and children, in groups of up to 96 people.

The intensity of repression in this area may be attributed partly to the fact that it was one of the main areas of operation of the SSA-South. It may also be seen as a deliberate strategy by the SPDC to ensure the total depopulation of the southern part of Kunhing township, which lies directly in the flood zone of the planned Ta Sang Dam on the Salween River in Shan State.



## 2. Outflows related to specific abuses:



There is evidence to suggest that particularly large-scale human rights abuses committed by the regime directly triggered refugee outflows to Thailand. For example, the graph below of arrivals from the village tract of Kun Bu, shows that a massacre of 20 civilians in the village of Kun Bu in February 2000 appears to have directly caused a sharp increase of people from this township fleeing to Thailand.

The case was reported in the SHRF monthly newsletter of March 2000 as follows:

### ***20 DISPLACED PERSONS IN HIDING MASSACRED IN KUN-HING***

*On 12.2.00, 20 villagers who were conducting an annual respect-paying rite at an altar of a territorial guardian spirit at Loi-maak-hin-taang were massacred by a column of SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) troops from IB246, in Kun Pu tract, Kun-Hing township, and 5 other villagers were also killed at a different place by the same troops on the same day.*

*These villagers were among those who had been forcibly displaced a few years ago by the SLORC/SPDC troops and had been in hiding since then, trying to survive by secretly growing small plots of rice and foraging for wild vegetables, games and fish. As it had been a long established practice for the villagers in the area to pay respect to the guardian spirit once a year, the villagers prepared some traditional offerings and 20 men went to Loi-maak-hin-taang where there was an altar, set up long ago by their ancestors.*

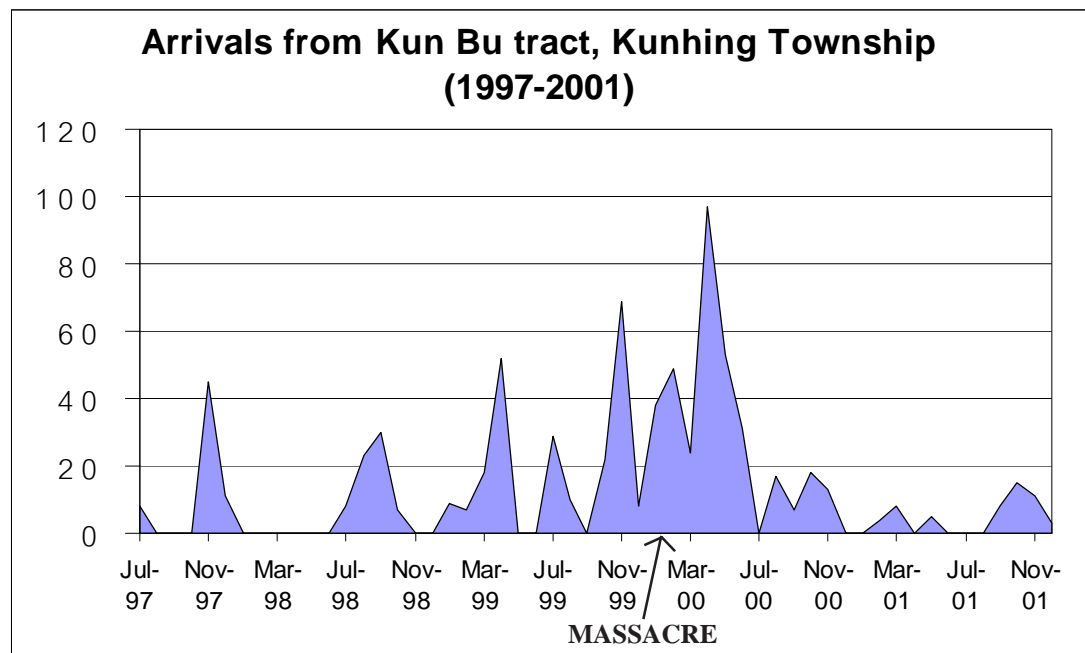
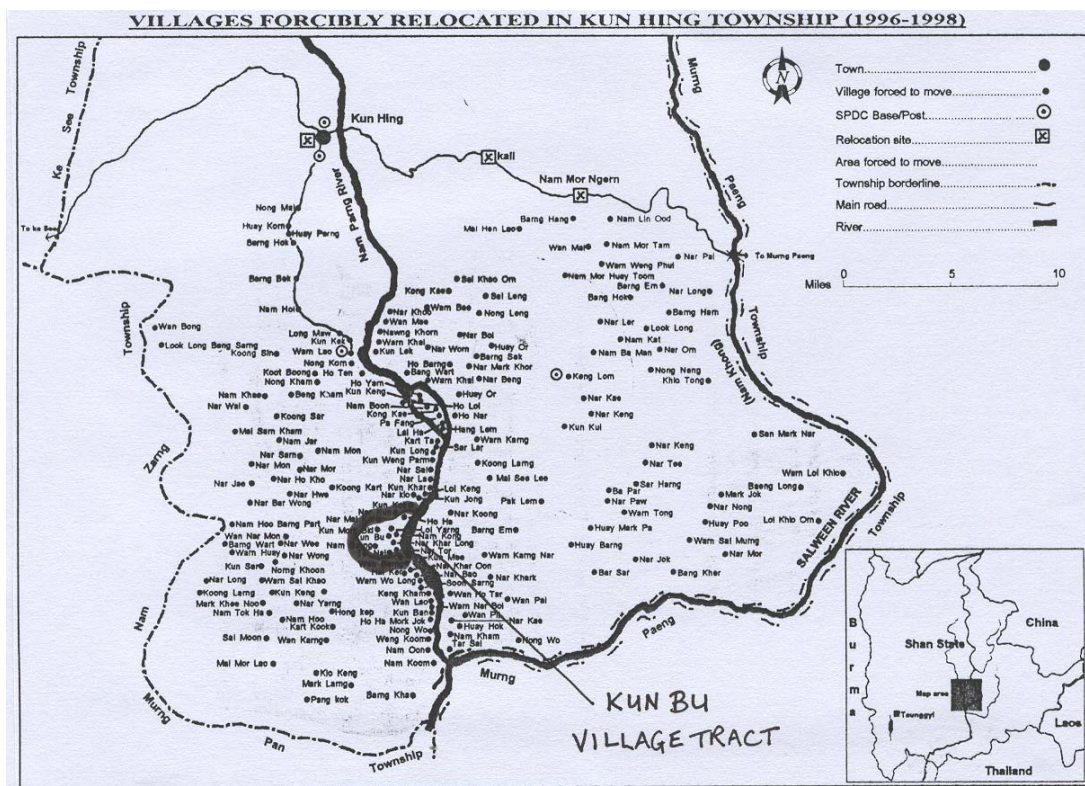
*A patrol of about 80-90 SPDC troops from IB246 led by Capt. Hla Khin saw them and shot all of them dead. The troops then ate all the food they found among the offerings and continued to patrol the area, and shot dead another 5 women and children who were hiding in a makeshift hut in a forest in the area.*

*The following is the list of the names of the 20 male victims and their original villages. All were in Kun Pu tract in Kun-Hing township:*

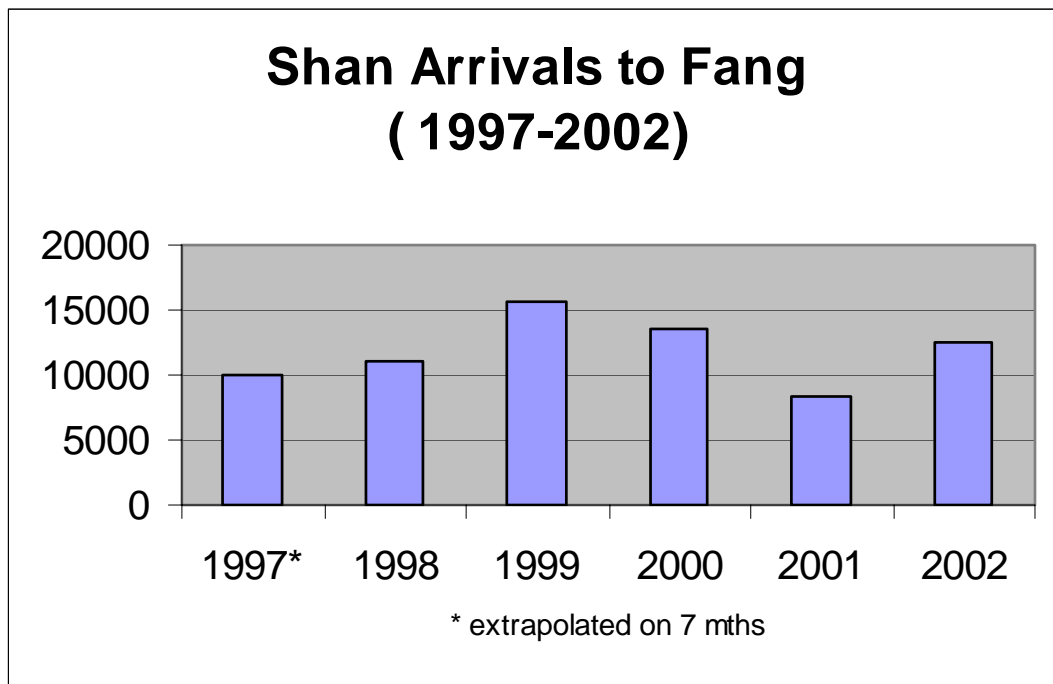
- 1. Zaai Yunt, aged 21, Kun Pu village*
- 2. Zaai Awng, aged 30, Kun Pu village*
- 3. Zaai Mu, aged 41, Kun Pu village*
- 4. Zaai Kaw, aged 36, Kun Pu village*
- 5. Zaai Maw-Nae-Ya, aged 25, Kun Pu village*
- 6. Zaai Thun Nae, aged 22, Kun Pu village*
- 7. Zaai Lon, aged 34, Kun Pu village*
- 8. Lung Saw, aged 47, Paang Khaa village*
- 9. Zaai Khur Seng, aged 43, Paang Khaa village*
- 10. Zaai Mu-Ling, aged 34, Paang Khaa village*
- 11. Zaai Pan-Ti, aged 33, Loi Yaang village*
- 12. Zaai Ka-Ling, aged 24, Loi Yaang village*
- 13. Zaai Taan, aged 26, Loi Yaang village*
- 14. Zaai Wi, aged 37, Loi Yaang village*
- 15. Zaai Maad, aged 40, Loi Yaang village*
- 16. Zaai Taw-Ya, aged 23, Loi Yaang village*

17. Lung Lam, aged 51, Naa Ke village
18. Lung Paan La, aged 53, Naa Ke village
19. Lung Laan, aged 44, Naa Ke village
20. Zaa Zi-Na, aged 31, Naa Ke village

### 3. Continuing high influx

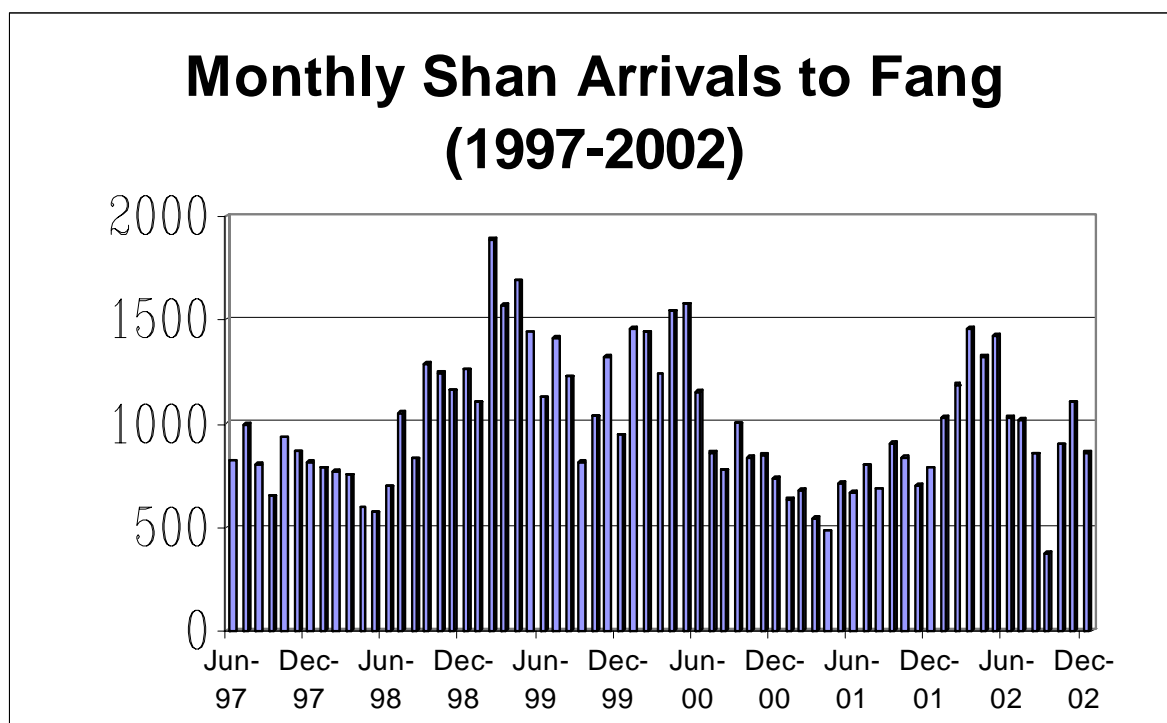


The following graph shows the annual total numbers of new arrivals to Fang between June 1997 and December 2002. Although there are no detailed records of numbers of Shans arriving prior to 1996, local Fang residents estimate that during 1990-1995 the numbers of Shan arrivals, who were mostly migrant workers, did not exceed about 4,000 per year. The annual totals of between approximately 8,000 and 15,000 from 1997 to 2002 are thus significantly higher and indicate that the new arrivals are refugees fleeing as a direct result of the increased and ongoing repression inside Shan State following the start of the forced relocation program in 1996.

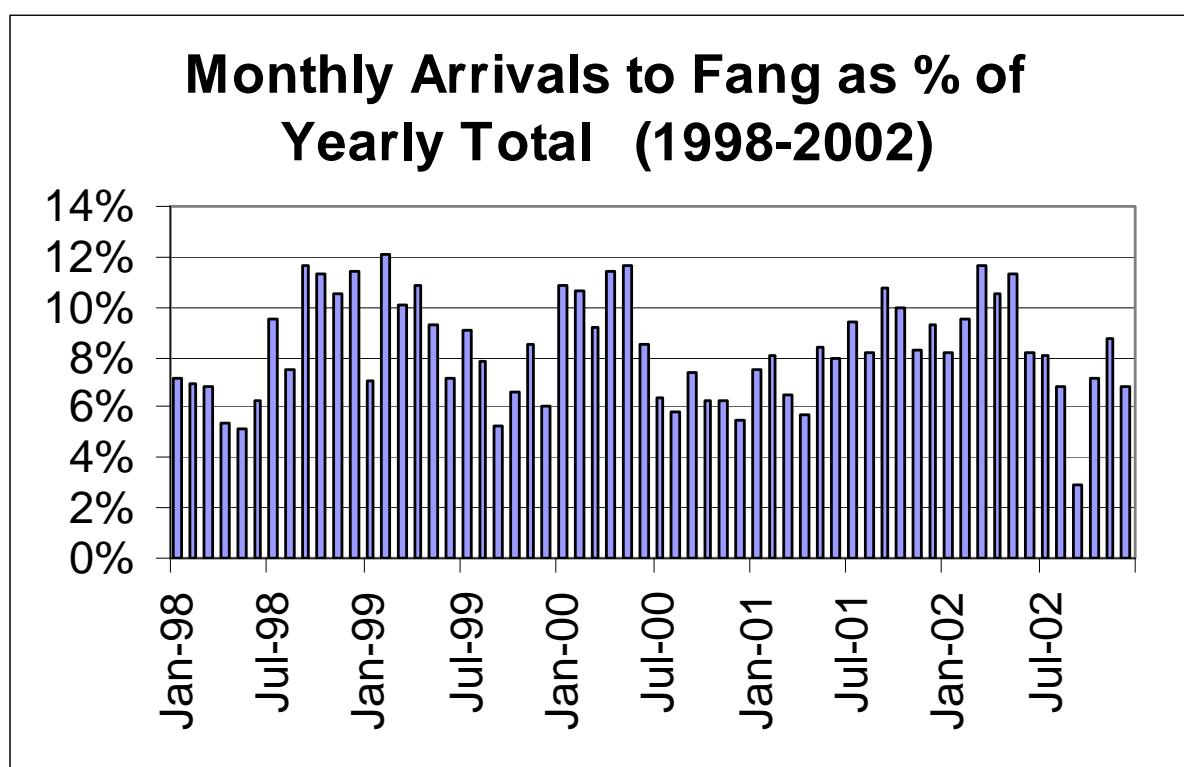


#### 4. Absence of seasonal patterns

The graph below shows the flow of new arrivals into Fang by monthly total. It is clear that there is no particular seasonal pattern to the inflow. This is evidence that these arrivals are not migrant workers coming to Thailand as seasonal labourers. Prior to 1996, Shan migrant workers would come to the Fang area of Thailand mainly in January of each year to work till May as agricultural labourers. They would save up money and then return to Shan State in time to plant rice in their own farms.

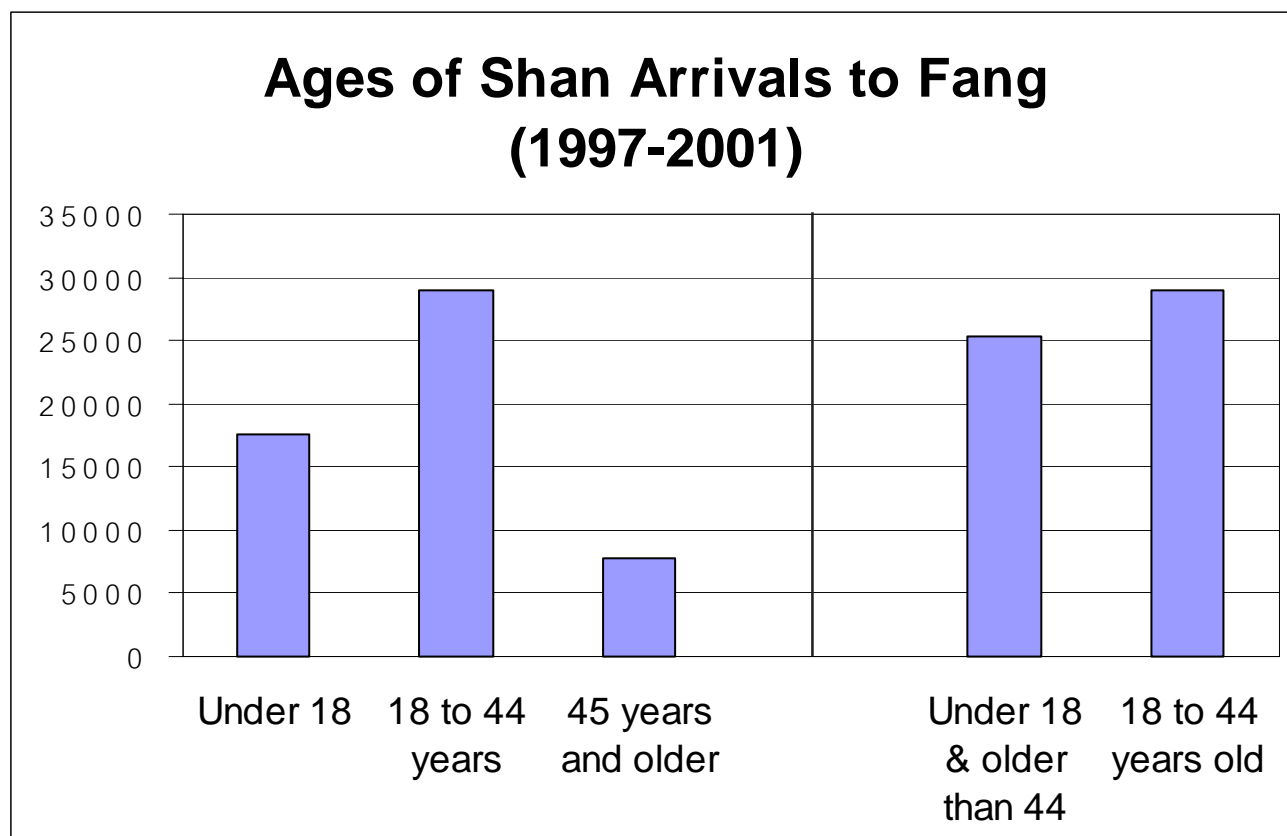


This lack of seasonal pattern to the influx can be seen more clearly in the graph showing the monthly influx as a percentage of the annual total. There is at most a 8% variation of inflow between the months of each year.





## 5. Fleeing as entire families



The graph above shows that 32% of the new arrivals were under 18 years old and 15% were 45 years old or over. In other words, only about half of the new arrivals are working-age adults.

According to Fang residents, prior to 1996, Shan migrant workers arriving in Fang were mostly working adults without dependents, who would come to Thailand to work as farm labourers for several months to save up money. They would not bring children or dependent older family members, as these would be a burden to them in Thailand while trying to save up money.

This is a clear indication that the Shans arriving were refugees, fleeing as entire families, and not migrant workers.

## 5. Equal numbers of men and women

An analysis of the sex of the refugees shows that there were almost equal numbers of men and women. According to local Fang residents, prior to 1996, the majority (about 70%) of the migrant workers arriving in the Fang area were men, mostly coming to work on the farms or construction sites. This is another indication that the Shans arriving since 1996 have not been typical migrant workers.

