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## SOCCKER TO THEM!

Push to free up gift for Cambodian kids

### EXCLUSIVE

BY DENISE ROMANO and ELIZABETH HAYS  
DAILY NEWS WRITERS

A Brooklyn school group's gift of soccer balls and jerseys for an orphanage in Cambodia has been caught up in a bureaucratic nightmare of red tape and corruption.

For more than a year, the donated equipment intended to make life a little happier for needy kids has been held up at a Cambodian port while local officials demand hundreds of dollars in fees.

The parents group has tried desperately to get the gifts released, including appealing to top Cambodian officials.

So far, they've gotten nowhere but they haven't given up - even though the Cambodian ambassador to the U.S. concedes that port corruption is a problem.

"I'm not frustrated yet," said Paula Shirk, a Brooklyn Heights mother of two whose son Rudi, 6, was adopted as a baby from Cambodia and who has raised thousands of dollars to help his birth family. "I'm relentless."

The nonprofit group, called Brooklyn Bridge to Cambodia, has spent the past year writing to top Cambodian officials, the U.S. ambassador to Cambodia and even Phnom Penh's Cambodia Daily newspaper, urging that the goods be freed.

All that has changed is the amount of money government officials are demanding, which has gone up and down several times, for no apparent reason.

When the shipment arrived in Phnom Penh in October 2006, Cambodian Customs and Excise Department officials told the group it had to pay \$650 for the goods to be released, the parents said.

The price then rose to \$1,560 before eventually coming back down to \$762 - more than twice what it cost to ship the goods in the first place - a payment the group's local contacts told them was essentially a bribe.

"It's very upsetting," said Craig Tooman, 45, of Boerum Hill, who helped coordinate the group's fund-raiser at Public School 261. "You try to teach your kids that they can make a difference."

Last spring, the group even launched a letter-writing campaign at PS 261 to pressure Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to step in.

"Please consider letting the soccer uniforms go to the children. You will be doing a good deed," wrote Hannah Wing, 10.

Told of the situation, Cambodian Ambassador to the U.S. Sereyath Ek said he would take the case to the country's minister of commerce.

"That happens sometimes in Cambodia that corrupt customs officers ask for bribes, not just in Cambodia but all over Asia," Ek told the Daily News. "I will try my best to help, but I cannot guarantee success."

Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) also vowed to "leave no stone unturned" until the donated goods reach the orphanage.

"The children of Brooklyn have sent a touching gift that will bring some cheer and enjoyment to orphans in impoverished Cambodia," Schumer said. "It is flat-out unacceptable that some corrupt Scrooges are preventing this gift from arriving."



*"Just where are those uniforms?" the Cambodian kids ponder.*



*Paula Shirk is flanked by sons Eli, 11 (l.) and Rudi, 6, at Brooklyn home. Shirk helped organize shipment of soccer gear to Cambodian orphanage, but gift has been stuck at dock for more than a year.*

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## Soccer effort finally scores

### GOAL!

#### Waylaid gifts arrive in Cambodia

BY ELIZABETH HAYS

**Goal!** The international soccer jersey incident is now officially over.

A shipment of donated soccer goods from a Boerum Hill school finally reached a group of Cambodian orphans last week after being held up for 16 months by allegedly corrupt port officials demanding hundreds of dollars in “fees.”

“I feel happy because we were able to help a poor country,” said Eli Shirk, 11, whose mother, Paula, founded the nonprofit behind the shipment as a way to help the birth village of Eli’s adopted brother, Rudi, 6.

“It was unfair they wouldn’t give them everything,” said Eli. “It didn’t seem right they didn’t want to help their own country.”

The delivery brings to an end a frustrating 18 months for the students of Public School 261, who gathered the used goods and shipped them off in August 2006. The equipment arrived in Phnom Penh just two months later - but the mission stalled when Cambodian port officials demanded “fees” from \$650 to \$1,560 to release the goods to the Palm Tree Institute orphanage.

Members of the group, Brooklyn Bridge to Cambodia, then tried everything they could to release the donations, from writing to Cambodian and U.S. government officials to printing an Op-Ed in the Cambodia Daily newspaper. But nothing worked until the group turned to the Daily News in December and to Sens. Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton, who pressured government officials in both countries to intervene.

“I am very delighted to have the gift from students in New York,” Srim, a young girl at the orphanage who is also Rudi’s sister, said to a local volunteer when the youngsters were finally able to try on the colorful soccer jerseys to pose for a photo.

“Even though we have never met each other, we feel that we are very close friends ... knowing that they care for us so much,” Srim said.

The donations were to be released to the orphanage just



*Children at Cambodian orphanage with soccer jerseys and balls donated by Brooklyn students.*

before Christmas. But unexpected delays held up the shipment again, until it finally arrived in large cardboard boxes last Wednesday.

“This is a game-changer for the Cambodian orphans who have for too long had too little in their lives,” said Schumer.

“Thanks to the unfailing generosity of the kids of Brooklyn, a dedicated embassy, and a helpful ambassador, the orphans of the Palm Tree Institute will now be able to bend it like Beckham to their hearts’ content.”

Paula Shirk, who has raised thousands of dollars to help Rudi’s birth family, said the group is already planning its next project, sending food to Rudi’s impoverished birth village.



*As the kids at the Palm Tree Orphanage received their long lost uniforms, the most delightful soccer game on the planet erupted, sans shoes and soccer balls.*