

# DAILY NEWS

50¢

2.5 MILLION READERS EVERY DAY

NYDailyNews.com

## 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.