

Despite Kinks, U.N. Works

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Long criticized for arduous and fruitless bickering, grandstanding and its slow movement, the United Nations is far from perfect, as Jan Kavan, a Czech diplomat and politician visiting Alameda freely admits. But despite structural limitations, the world body has accomplished much and could guide the globe's nations away from catastrophic confrontation.

Kavan, a guest and long-time friend of Arthur Lipow, the chair of the Alameda Public Affairs Forum, will speak Saturday at the Alameda Free Library in a presentation titled "Global Citizenship vs. a New Arms Race: Can Peace Trump Hegemony?"

Kavan, whose father was arrested in a Soviet purge and died in 1960 due to his imprisonment, became a dissident himself, helping to lead the so-called Prague Spring reform movement, which ended in a bloody 1968 Soviet intervention.

Looking more professorial than student activist these days, Kavan clearly demonstrates what can be accomplished working within the system. After a 20-year exile in Britain, Kavan returned to then Czechoslovakia and after a few short years became deputy prime minister.

These days, Kavan, who served a one-year term as president of the United Nations General Assembly, is busy advocating on behalf of the U.N. — its possibilities and aspirations. "The United Nations is best in providing shelter, basic education and health; inoculations, medication. The United Nations is a platform; a place you can use to settle disputes," Kavan said over lunch in the book-lined basement of an ornate Alameda Victorian.

The biggest threat facing the world today, he said, is failing to realize that diplomacy, not military action, was the correct course in confronting Saddam Hussein. "The argument that Iraq presented a threat to the United States and the world was not accurate," he said. The same rush to war should not recur with Iran.

Being a world body is not easy, Kavan said of the United Nations. The competing interests of many powerful states, some with Security Council veto power, often prevent decisive action. "The United Nations is more successful in areas of the world where there is not a major interest of a major power involved," he said, rattling off conflicts between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the civil war in Sierra Leone as success stories where the U.N. moved quickly to end bloodshed.

"Even in fields like post-conflict reconstruction, the U.N. has had a great deal of success, for example in East Timor. Now, that does not say that East Timor is not without difficulties, but there would be no East Timor at all if not for the U.N. It would still be under Indonesian occupation, if not all-out chaos," he said.

The U.N. system faces challenges of its own ahead, including democratizing itself, Kavan said. Established as a wartime coalition allied against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, the five great powers of the time — the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China — still hold a great deal more power than the other 187 member nations. "The U.N. cannot succeed against a determined effort by a major power, but that does not mean it is irrelevant or just a debating club."

Kavan will speak Saturday, Nov. 10, from 7 to 9:30 p.m. at the Alameda Free Library. The event is free.

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