INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Senegal's Debt Crisis: Towards Sustainable and Progressive Alternatives to the IMF's Austerity Approach

Address by Mr. Ayeda Robert Kotchani,
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Regional Representative for West Africa (OHCHR-ROA)

Dakar, May 13, 2026

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the organizers of this timely conference. While I cannot convey this message in person, I am honored to share these remarks with you, and I extend my respect to Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko, Minister of Justice Yassine Fall, and all the distinguished participants and speakers.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to put forward a single message: "Debt is a human rights issue," and Senegal has played a historic role in ensuring that everyone understands that debt is indeed a human rights issue.

Exactly 60 years ago, in 1966, at the 21st session of the United Nations General Assembly, His Excellency Doudou Thiam, then minister of Foreign Affairs of Senegal, linked the economic challenges faced by formerly colonized countries to a new concept: the "right to development." Then, it was the Senegalese jurist and scholar, the Honourable Judge Kéba M'baye, who gave the conceptual and legal form to what is today internationally recognized as a human, universal and inalienable right, crystallized in the Declaration on the Right to Development adopted in New York on December 4, 1986.

Nearly sixty years later, the disparities identified by these two illustrious sons of Senegal remain not only visible, but also equally fundamental to the systemic challenges facing Senegal, Africa and the Global South.

We must speak honestly: the right to development, the implementation of which fundamentally affects the realization of all other human rights, is not only underrealized. It is in danger. And the debt, its management and its governance have a central place in guaranteeing this Senegalese creation, the right to development, and all the other human rights that derive from it.

Yesterday, we heard strong speeches on issues such as transparency, parliamentary oversight, and institutional accountability. However, these concepts are human rights principles.

Debt governance is an integral part of a country's good governance and, therefore, an area of full applicability of international human rights norms and commitments.

We heard how fiscal consolidation has often resulted in regressive fiscal policies, reduced fiscal space, and high inequality, with a direct negative impact on the realization of rights.

This means fewer resources for health, education, and social protection, and it is women who compensate this with an increased burden of caregiving. Even in times of austerity, human rights remain an obligation.

However, when socio-economic indicators decline and there is a retrogression of economic and social rights, the conditions are created for civil and political instability that can lead to further rights violations, as we have seen in other contexts.

Yesterday, we also heard that multilateral frameworks have not kept their end of the bargain, which was reaffirmed at the Fourth Financing for Development Forum in Seville, by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. António Guterres, who said that the current global debt system is "unsustainable, unfair, and unaffordable", and should be reformed to give rise to “a system that lowers borrowing costs, enables fair and timely debt-restructuring, and prevents debt crises in the first place."

International human rights mechanisms have repeatedly warned of the debilitating impacts of delayed and inadequate debt restructuring. They showed how countries with little or no social protection are dragged into vicious cycles of adjustment that erode rights rather than realize them.

Then, the current United Nations Special Rapporteur on the effects of foreign debt and human rights, currently Professor Attiya Waris, repeatedly warns of the unsustainable nature of the debt distress of developing countries, stating that the current repayment mechanisms hinder the realization of fundamental human rights. In this context, it is precisely these special human rights procedures, the Human Rights Council, and regional systems that are being discredited, attacked, defunded, and sanctioned.

Finally, I would like to point out that current debt sustainability analyses do not incorporate the human rights obligations of states. They do not take into account the positive multiplier effects of productive public investment, in particular in health systems, social protection, and climate action. Yet, investments that could prevent future crises are seen as fiscal risks, while the social and political costs of collapse are implicitly accepted. These political risks remain completely outside the framework of current debt sustainability methodologies.

So, excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen, what solutions can we talk about and move towards a human rights economy?

The Borrowers' Platform is an important example of South-South cooperation where different experiences can inform and strengthen the implementation of the obligations of the international human rights system, including those relating to the right to development.

We also need equitable debt relief for vulnerable countries, better access to concessional and climate finance, and a multilateral restructuring framework that preserves fiscal space for schools, hospitals, and social programs.

In addition, Africa has launched its own credit rating agency, which could provide independent ratings that reflect the continent's own complex realities.

In December 2025, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in partnership with the Office of the Resident Coordinator, UNDP, UNICEF, UNCTAD, and ActionAid Senegal organized a Roundtable on Debt Management and Governance for Human Rights and Sustainable Development in Senegal. The message of all participants was the same: debt is a question of rights, and only with rights-based governance and management can we guarantee that debt is a tool and not an obstacle to development.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights remains fully committed alongside the Government and all national and international actors to support these reforms in favour of good debt governance, in a spirit of partnership, respected sovereignty and shared responsibility.

Debt must remain a tool in the service of the right to development, Senegal's universal contribution, and not an obstacle to social progress or the realization of all other human rights. Through dialogue, cooperation, and collective ambition, we can make debt a real lever for an economy based on human rights and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Senegal.

I hope that the exchanges will be rich and frank and bring concrete solutions that we are waiting for with legitimate impatience to meet the challenges.

With that, I thank you for your kind attention.

*