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Subject: EU ministers say Egypt must protect minorities (Reuters)

LUXEMBOURG (Reuters) - European Union ministers expressed alarm on Monday about the deaths of at least 24 people in clashes between military police and Christians in Egypt and said the authorities had a duty to protect religious minorities.

The violence, some of the worst in Egypt since an uprising toppled Hosni Mubarak in February, occurred on Sunday in Cairo, where Christians staged protests about an attack on a church.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said he was "very alarmed" and German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said violence against religious minorities was "unacceptable".

"I think it is very important the Egyptian authorities and all concerned reaffirm freedom of worship in Egypt and that all sides step back from violence," Hague told reporters ahead of a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg.

Danish Foreign Minister Villy Sovental called for a strong condemnation of the violence. "Nothing in this world gives people the right to move into a religious fight. And I think it's a bit scary that we come to that point in Egypt."

Dutch Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal called the violence "extremely worrisome" and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said the events in Egypt and violence in Tunis -- where police used tear gas against Islamist protesters on Sunday -- would be at the core of ministers' discussions in Luxembourg.

"We really do expect that Egypt will move towards its elections with the desire to see all people as part of those elections and to protect the people whoever they are, wherever they come from and whatever belief and faith they have," she said.

The Cairo violence casts a shadow over Egypt's first parliamentary election since Mubarak's fall. Voting starts on Nov. 28 with candidates due to begin registering during the week starting on Wednesday.

"Egypt needs to move forward politically and economically against the backdrop of recognising that what happened in the Arab spring now needs to turn into a real democracy of a country where people of a country where people can...recognise that their human rights are respected," Ashton said.

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said he was "very worried", adding: "The authorities have the

responsibility to protect each and everyone; also their right to express their opinions. So it was highly regrettable."

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