Tackling burning issues

Fareed Rahman visits a control room fighting to keep the flames at bay

They say wherever there's smoke there's fire but that's not always the case as workers at Dubai Civil Defence's 24/7 Command Control Centre well know. The number of fires across the emirate is falling year after year and the centre, which is based in the Pacific Control Systems office in Jebel Ali, is at the forefront of that battle.

The control room is linked up to 30,000 buildings across Dubai, which includes residential blocks, offices, hotels and shops. "Since the implementation of the system in 2008 there has been a significant drop in the number of fires in Dubai. This improvement has come despite a growth in population and construction in the city," business development manager of Pacific Control Systems LLC, Nigel MacKenzie, told 7DAYS during a tour of the centre. Latest statistics from the Dubai Civil Defence show that in 2009 there were 486 fires in Dubai, compared to 595 in 2008 and 631 in 2007. The number of deaths due to fires has also dropped from two in 2009, compared to 26 in 2008 and 25 people in 2007. As well as fire alerts, the control room receives alerts about low water tank levels, gas leaks and lift faults. It receives about 6,000 alerts a day - 1,000 of these are fire related, but the majority of them are false alarms. The benefit of having the centre is so that emergency response teams are not sent out to deal with false alarms but only put into action in a real emergency.

The small team of staff, which consists of between 12 to 15 people working the day shifts and either six or seven at night, are trained to screen alarms so they report genuine emergencies to civil defence rescue teams who can be deployed to the scene and disregard the false ones. Jagmeet Singh Tagore, operations manager of centre, said: "Most of these incidents are triggered from the industrial, factories or sheds. Industrial areas are the most likely places for fires as they house a number of warehouses," he said. "Alarms are routed to the control room operator for verification."

Staff make a number of checks to see whether the alarm is genuine. "Displays in the monitoring room automatically give us information on the building location, the problem, contact details, floor plans and different routes to the building as well as the nearest fire station." Once it is verified that the emergency is real civil defence is contacted and an emergency team dispatched. The centre is able to track the rescue vehicle, including its speed and location.

fareed.rahman@7days.ae

RAGING: Firefighters fight a fire in Al Quoz and, inset, the control room which dispatches emergency teams to such incidents