



Press information
For immediate release

Good day at the office for Abu Dhabi on Monte Carlo rally

The first day of this year's FIA World Rally Championship season opener, the Rallye Monte Carlo, saw a long day at the office for the Abu Dhabi-backed BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team. The day began with the traditional pre-event shakedown and finished with a pair of night-time stages totalling almost 36Km, to round-off a 14-hour day for the crews.

The weather in the region around the rally base of Valence could not have been better – a clear night led to bright sunshine but low temperatures – the thermometer didn't climb above zero until well into the morning as the crews finished their preparations for the start of the event.

The main talk of the morning was of tyres. Regulations for the 2008 season mean that all the cars are running control Pirelli tyres. While on most events, all teams will have the same single design and compound of tyre, there are several options available to drivers for Monte Carlo. These include the tarmac tyre that will be used later in the season, as well as a winter tyre, with a more open tread pattern and softer compound. There is also a studded version of the winter tyre available, to cope with icy sections in the asphalt stages.

Both of the team's nominated drivers, Mikko Hirvonen and Jari-Matti Latvala had already tested the Pirelli tyres but for the team's third driver, Abu Dhabi's rally representative Sheikh Khalid Al Qassimi, it was his first taste of the Italian rubber, as well as the latest specification of the 2007 season-winning Ford Focus RS World Rally Car. While the Emirati driver was aware of the improvements to the car, he was also keen to understand the nature of the new tyres and how the grip developed on the cold, tarmac stage.

"This morning went well," Al Qassimi explained. "We tried a few small changes to see what effect they would have but nothing too drastic. I'm just trying to get used to so much this weekend – the new car, new tyres, completely new conditions and of course, working with Michael [Orr, co-driver] again. The Pirelli tyres seem to work well and I was deliberately sliding the car to try to learn the level of grip which they offer, both on clean asphalt as well as when it becomes dirtier, as it will if drivers ahead of me cut the corners."





Once the shakedown was complete, the cars returned to Valence for the start of the event. Once again, the Monte features two night-time stages run in the hills around Valence and while the weather remained clear throughout the day, the temperature dropped markedly as dusk fell. The result was very slippery roads as the crews took to the two stages, totalling 36Km of competition in complete darkness.

Both Hirvonen and Latvala have competed on the event before and it showed. Hirvonen returned to Valence in the first of the Abu Dhabi-branded Focus' in third place, a familiar feeling for the young Finn, behind early leader Sebastien Loeb and team-mate Dani Sordo in second.

Latvala didn't fare quite so well, hitting a rock in the first stage and immediately puncturing his tyre. As the control tyres this year do not use the anti-deflation mousse from previous seasons, he and co-driver Miikka Antilla were forced to stop and change the tyre. This cost them some three or four minutes, dropping the pair down the order to 19th.

The first two stages were a baptism of fire, as well as snow and ice for Al Qassimi. The Emirati admitted that he would take it easy at the beginning of the event but even so, he still set a tenth-fastest time on the opening test and just outside the top ten on the second, despite this being his first time representing Abu Dhabi on the Monte Carlo rally.

"The first two stages this evening were very difficult," said Al Qassimi, "but that's all part of the program. The first 17Km of stage one were dry and we set a steady pace. Then there was snow and ice for the rest of the stage, so we cruised to the finish. I stalled the engine at the start of the second stage and I think we lost around 15 seconds trying to get it going again. There was snow at some of the corners but the safety crew did a great job letting us know what to expect.

"Overall, I'm pleased with the times on the first two stages, especially as it is my first time here. It's a good start but of course, there is a very long way to go and three more days of competition, so I must concentrate and make sure we do not have any mistakes on the way."

The second day of the rally takes the crews to the south-west of Valence, for two loops of three stages, with the first stage starting at 08.24hrs.

Ends





Note to Editors:

About Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi is the largest of the seven emirates which comprise the United Arab Emirates (UAE), forming 80% of the country's land-mass and is home to the capital, **Abu Dhabi City**. The Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority (ADTA) has embarked on a dynamic campaign to develop a world-class infrastructure as an up-scale sporting, cultural and leisure destination, aimed at discerning visitors. In rallying, **Abu Dhabi** has formed a ground-breaking partnership with the BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team in the FIA World Rally Championship, as well as becoming Official Destination Partner to the championship itself. The nation hosts a round of the FIA Historic Rally Championship and the UAE also hosts the final round of the MERC. **Abu Dhabi** has launched a host of global sporting initiatives, including the European Tour-backed **Abu Dhabi** Golf Championship and from 2009, it will host a round of the FIA Formula One World Championship. The nation has recently announced plans to welcome some of the world's most famous cultural icons, including the Louvre **Abu Dhabi** and the Guggenheim **Abu Dhabi**.

