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Rally Argentina - after stage 4, San Marcos - Charbonier

Massive crowds packed Cordoba last night for the start ceremony of this fourth round of the FIA World Rally Championship. More than 50,000 fans lined the roads as competitors headed out of the city to the rally base in Carlos Paz. The action began in earnest this morning as drivers headed north for the opening group of four speed tests in the Punilla Valley. Heavy rain in the last 24 hours made the gravel roads muddy and combined with unexpectedly cool temperatures, conditions were far from ideal for the hard compound Pirelli Scorpion tyres that the regulations demand competitors use.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally team drivers Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen made a sensational start on the opening 18.70km speed test from La Cumbre to Agua de Oro. The 27-year-old Finnish pilot, leader of the drivers' standings in the championship, posted fastest time in his Ford Focus RS World Rally Car by a remarkable 48.1sec, despite thick fog and sticky mud.

Hirvonen won the following 23.28km test from Ascochinga back across the hills to La Cumbre and rounded off a superb morning with another victory on the last special stage of the loop, the 9.61km San Marcos - Charbonier. He returned to the midday service in Carlos Paz with a lead of 50.8sec.

"I couldn't see much in the first stage because of fog and visibility was down to 10 metres in places, but I'm not afraid to drive fast when I can't see," said Hirvonen. "I had no idea how good my speed was and at the finish my first words to Jarmo were 'we've either lost a minute or won a minute'. My pace notes worked really well and in fog that is so important. There was also a lot of rain and the stage was treacherous. The roads will be even muddier this afternoon but I need to continue at this pace."

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila were second in the opening test but the 22-year-old Finn struck trouble in the second stage. "I didn't enjoy the first stage and didn't feel comfortable going into the next test," said Latvala. "About 1km after the start I came to a flat left corner that tightened and I hit the bank. That bounced the car across the road and I rolled off the track at the next right corner. The car landed with Miikka's side up against a small tree. Spectators helped us move the car off the tree and rolled it back onto its wheels before finding a small road that led back to the stage. The damage wasn't big, just a cracked windscreen and some body damage."

Latvala lost nine minutes and dropped to 30th, but has already recovered to 21st, helped by setting fastest time on the stage following his accident.

Leaderboard after stage 4 of 21

1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	55min 54.1sec
2. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	56min 44.9sec
3. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	57min 27.9sec
4. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	57min 58.0sec
5. G Galli/G Bernacchini	ITA	Ford Focus RS	58min 09.9sec
6. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	58min 13.1sec

7. F Villagra/J Perez Companc	ARG	Ford Focus RS	59min 39.9sec
8. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	59min 45.7sec
9. T Gardemeister/T Tuominen	FIN	Suzuki SX4	1hr 00min 12.4sec
10 M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	1hr 00min 28.0sec