

For immediate release: 28 March 2008

## Hirvonen and Latvala deliver six of the best in Rally Argentina

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team won six of the nine speed tests during today's demanding opening leg of Rally Argentina. Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen and team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila each claimed three victories in Ford Focus RS World Rally Cars, but problems for both Finnish pairings kept them down the order tonight. Latvala is eighth after rolling this morning while Hirvonen retired from the lead after hitting a rock and breaking the suspension.

This fourth round of the FIA World Rally Championship has not run in March for several years, but there was little of the fading south American summer to enjoy in the pampas of Cordoba province today. The vast open plains of the Punilla Valley, north of the rally base in Carlos Paz, were blitzed by fog, low cloud, heavy rain and mud this morning before - finally - sunshine made a brief appearance.

Massive crowds packed Cordoba last night for the start ceremony, more than 50,000 fans lining the roads as competitors headed out of the city to Carlos Paz. The action began in earnest this morning but constantly changing conditions made life difficult for competitors over the 150.86km of gravel speed tests. Cool temperatures made it hard for drivers to generate heat into the hard compound Pirelli Scorpion tyres that regulations demand all competitors use and mud ensured normal grip was sporadic.

Thick fog shrouded the hills around La Cumbre for the first two special stages but Hirvonen set an astounding pace. He was fastest by a remarkable 48.1sec on the opening stage and went on to win the next test and the last of the four stages in the opening loop, to return 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."

However, 8km from the end of the afternoon's opening test, Hirvonen's run at the front ended. "I hit a big rock in a left corner with the wheel on full lock and the impact broke the bolts in the track control arm. The rock was in a rut and became exposed after the first pass through the stage so it's not something I would have had in my pace notes. I was unlucky and I'm disappointed because the rally started well and I needed a win here and the points," he said. He will restart tomorrow under SuperRally rules in 25th position.

Latvala was 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," he said. "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 began his recovery in style with fastest time on the very next stage. He won two more tests this afternoon but also spun and stalled his car's engine on two occasions. "I've been happy with my speed, I just need to get rid of my mistakes," admitted Latvala. "Tomorrow's stages are faster and wider and I hope it stays dry. If not, then at least I've learned today how to drive when it's wet and slippery and conditions are tricky."

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson said the day was 'probably the most difficult we've had since we launched the new Focus RS in Finland last August'. "We were in an incredible position after the first stage only to lose Jari-Matti and then Mikko after an uncharacteristic mistake. But the Focus RS won seven out of the nine stages, and that's quite some statistic," he said.

## News from our Rivals

Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) replaced Hirvonen in top spot and built an overnight lead of 1min 30.6sec, despite winning only one stage. Chris Atkinson (Subaru) lies second, despite spinning twice on the penultimate test, with team-mate Petter Solberg in third, although the Norwegian drove all afternoon with a broken front shock absorber. Stobart driver Gigi Galli (Ford) won one stage and lies fourth, moving ahead of Dani Sordo (Citroen) on the penultimate stage when the Spaniard had power steering problems. Munchi's Federico Villagra (Ford) rounds off the top six on his home rally. There have been many retirements, including Henning Solberg (Ford) and Toni Gardemeister (Suzuki), who both hit rocks and broke their cars' suspension. Per-Gunnar Andersson (Suzuki) failed to reach the first stage following an engine sensor problem and Luis Perez Companc (Ford) slid off the road on the penultimate test.

## Tomorrow's Route

The second day is held over faster roads south of Carlos Paz in the Calamuchita valley. After starting at 06.10, drivers face two identical loops of four tests, split by a return to Carlos Paz for service in the middle of the day. The leg ends with a second pass over the short test at Cordoba's soccer stadium before competitors reach the final overnight halt at 20.10 after 154.38km of competition.

## Leaderboard after Day 1

1. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	1hr 54min 28.0sec
2. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	1hr 55min 58.6sec
3. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	1hr 56min 06.9sec
4. G Galli/G Bernacchini	ITA	Ford Focus RS	1hr 56min 15.7sec
5. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	1hr 56min 34.9sec
6. F Villagra/J Perez Companc	ARG	Ford Focus RS	1hr 59min 16.3sec
7. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	2hr 00min 46.3sec
8. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2hr 03min 55.5sec
9. C Rautenbach/D Senior	ZIM	Citroen C4	2hr 04min 59.8sec
10 A Aigner/K Wicha	GER	Mitsubishi Lancer	2hr 06min 49.0sec

## Stage Times

Stage 1: 1. Hirvonen 16min 29.3sec; 2. Latvala + 48.1; 3. Loeb + 50.7; 4. Atkinson + 1:14.8; 5. P Solberg + 1:33.8; 6. Galli + 1:35.3.

Stage 2: 1. Hirvonen 14min 59.6sec; 2. Loeb + 2.0; 3. Atkinson + 11.6; 4. P Solberg + 13.6; 5. Galli + 36.0; 6. Sordo + 37.8; **41. Latvala + 9:06.6.**

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 31min 28.9sec; 2. Loeb + 52.7; 3. Atkinson + 1:26.4; 4. P Solberg + 1:47.4; 5. Galli + 2:11.3; 6. Sordo + 2:17.6; **29. Latvala + 9:54.7.**

Stage 3: 1. Latvala 17min 39.7sec; 2. Loeb + 3.0; 3. Galli + 6.5; 4. Hirvonen + 7.2; 5. Sordo + 8.0; 6. Atkinson + 8.8.

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 49min 15.8sec; 2. Loeb + 48.5; 3. Atkinson + 1:28.0; 4. P Solberg + 1:59.3; 5. Galli + 2:10.6; 6. Sordo + 2:18.4; **22. Latvala + 9:47.5.**

Stage 4: 1. Hirvonen 6min 38.3sec; 2. Sordo + 0.6; 3. H Solberg + 1.6; 4. Loeb + 2.3; 5. P Solberg + 4.6; 6. Galli + 5.2; **13. Latvala + 25.0.**

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 55min 54.1sec; 2. Loeb + 50.8; 3. Atkinson + 1:33.8; 4. P Solberg + 2:03.9; 5. Galli + 2:15.8; 6. Sordo + 2:19.0; **21. Latvala + 10:12.5.**

Stage 5: 1. Loeb 14min 51.3sec; 2. Galli + 10.5; 3. Sordo + 11.3; 4. Atkinson + 11.7; 5. P Solberg + 13.7; **6. Latvala + 16.9.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 11min 36.2sec; 2. Atkinson + 54.7; 3. P Solberg + 1:26.8; 4. Sordo + 1:39.5; 5. Galli + 1:55.5; 6. Villagra + 3:33.5; **15. Latvala + 9:38.6.**

Stage 6: 1. Latvala 17min 23.1sec; 2. Galli + 0.9; 3. Atkinson + 5.1; 4. Sordo + 6.0; 5. Loeb + 7.1; 6. P Solberg + 13.8.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 29min 06.4sec; 2. Atkinson + 52.7; 3. P Solberg + 1:33.5; 4. Sordo + 1:38.4; 5. Galli + 1:49.3; 6. Villagra + 3:51.0; **12. Latvala + 9:38.6.**

Stage 7: 1. Galli 6min 33.5sec; 2. Atkinson + 0.4; **3. Latvala + 1.1;** 4. Sordo + 1.2; 5. Loeb + 2.1; 6. P Solberg + 5.7.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 35min 42.0sec; 2. Atkinson + 51.0; 3. P Solberg + 1:37.1; 4. Sordo + 1:37.5; 5. Galli + 1:47.2; 6. Villagra + 3:57.4; **11. Latvala + 9:30.5.**

Stage 8: 1. Latvala 17min 02.3sec; 2. Loeb + 2.7; 3. Galli + 3.0; 4. P Solberg + 5.8; 5. Sordo + 30.3; 6. Atkinson + 43.9.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 52min 47.0sec; 2. Atkinson + 1:32.2; 3. P Solberg + 1:40.2; 4. Galli + 1:47.5; 5. Sordo + 2:05.1; 6. Villagra + 4:45.5; **8. Latvala + 9:27.8.**

Stage 9: 1. Atkinson 1min 39.4sec; 2. P Solberg + 0.3; **3. Latvala + 1.3;** 4. Loeb + 1.6; 5. Galli + 1.8; 6. Sordo + 3.4.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 54min 28.0sec; 2. Atkinson + 1:30.6; 3. P Solberg + 1:38.9; 4. Galli + 1:47.7; 5. Sordo + 2:06.9; 6. Villagra + 4:48.3; **8. Latvala + 9:27.5.**