

**2009 Troodos Rally - Round 5 – 2009 FIA Middle East Rally Championship
9th-11th October 2009**

MERC CHAMPIONSHIP LEADER AL-RAJHI EXITS TROODOS RALLY ON FIRST STAGE

Lebanon's Roger Feghali holds lunchtime lead in Cyprus; Defending Champ Al-Attiyah of Qatar 3rd

The FIA Middle East Rally Championship moved to Cyprus today with the start of the 2009 Troodos Rally.

A tense battle had been expected between championship leader Yazeed Al-Rajhi of Saudi Arabia and defending MERC champion Nasser Al-Attiyah, but Al-Rajhi's hopes of a strong finish were short-lived when he and French co-driver Matthieu Baumel exited in dramatic fashion on the first stage of the day. Reports from the stage said that their Peugeot 207 S2000 landed badly after a jump, left the road and ended up perilously close to a sharp drop. Speaking at the Service Park later, Al-Rajhi said he plans to Superally tomorrow.

Lebanon's Roger Feghali held the lunchtime lead in his Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX, alongside co-driver Nicola Arena, and while Al-Rajhi's hopes of scoring high points were quickly dashed in SS1, Al-Attiyah's claim to be taking a cautious approach certainly didn't stop him taking the first stage of the day – the 20.53km Agios Nicolaos stage – in 18m.36s. Al-Attiyah has made this event his own in recent years by taking six consecutive victories and he's clearly gunning for a 7th. He is competing in a Subaru Impreza N15 2009, alongside co-driver Giovanni Bernacchini of Italy.

Feghali showed impressive pace in his Mitsubishi, finishing SS1 15.3 seconds behind Al-Attiyah, but young Cypriot star Nicos Thomas was chasing hard, just 0.7 seconds behind Feghali in his own Evo IX. Misfer Al-Marri, who currently sits in 2nd place in the championship (7 points behind Al-Rajhi and 1 point ahead of Al-Attiyah), could only manage 7th fastest through the stage, 47.2 seconds behind Al-Attiyah. Lebanon's Nick Georgiou was marginally quicker, finishing the stage 6th. Popular Cypriot drivers Paraskevas Paraskeva and Constantinos Tingirides finished the stage 4th and 5th fastest respectively.

Feghali picked up the pace still further in SS2 (the 13.62km Panagia stage), finishing it 4.3 seconds faster than 2nd fastest Thomas. But Al-Attiyah wasn't giving much ground, charging through the stage just 0.6 seconds behind Thomas. Paraskeva and Georgiou sped through the stage 4th and 5th fastest respectively, with Tingirides and Al-Marri close behind.

A puncture cost Al-Attiyah time in SS3 and the rest of the field were quick to capitalize. Thomas sped through the 21.76km Xeropigi/Stavros stage in 23m 37 seconds, with Feghali hard on his heels just 3.9 seconds behind. Georgiou managed 3rd fastest, with Al-Attiyah 4th. Tingirides and Al-Mari came 5th and 6th.

Al-Rajhi might have exited in SS1, but round 5 of this year's MERC, is proving as exciting as ever and once again proving its reputation as one of the world's most challenging rally events. By lunchtime service, 8 competitors were out of the day's competition, including Al-Rajhi. Khalid Al-Suwaidi of Qatar was forced to abandon the day through the recurrence of a virus and it is currently unknown if he will choose to continue tomorrow. Also out were Qatari Abdulaziz Al-Kuwari, and Cypriot drivers Paraskevas Paraskeva, Andreas Philippou, Yiotis Chartoupallos, Chris Arneftis, and George Paphitis.

The Troodos Rally is characterized by its friendly nature and the mood in the early morning Service Park was typically upbeat. The rally got underway from the Geroskipou Service Park at 08:00 this morning, with the first car entering Special Stage (SS) 1 at 08:58, SS2 at 09:46, and SS3 at 10:14. This afternoon will see crews tackle the morning loop of three stages again, with SS4 (Agios Nicolaos) at 13:02, SS5 (Panagia) at 13:50, and SS6 (Xeropigi-Stavros) at 14:18. Flexi Service out and Parc Ferme in at the Service Park is at 16:13, with the last car into Parc Ferme at 19:00. The day will see drivers tackle a total of 316.14km, including 111.84km of special stage action.

Tomorrow, crews will cover a further 383.30km, including 139.22km of Special Stages. Parc Ferme out is at 07:00 on Sunday morning, with the first car entering the first stage of the day SS7 (Anadiou Dam) at 07:58. The first car enters SS8 (Foinokli) at 08:56, SS9 (Argaka) at 09:49. SS10 (Stavros) starts at 10:42 and crews then return to Service at 12:07. Crews will then head out for the last four stages of the event – SS11 (Anadiou Dam) at 13:15, SS12 (Foinokli) at 14:13, SS13 (Argaka) at 15:06, and finally SS14 (Stavros) at 15:59. Cars will return to the Service Park for final service at 17:04.

The Finish ceremony and prizegiving will get underway at 17:30 at Geroskipou town square.

Following its successful move to the west coast of the island last year, the Troodos Rally is once again based around the popular town of Geroskipou. The event Headquarters, Press Office and Service Park are located in and around Geroskipou's Riu Cypria Maris hotel.

The 2009 Troodos Rally is organised by the Cyprus Automobile Association (CAA) and supported by the Cyprus Tourism Organisation.

For further information about this year's Troodos Rally, visit www.caa.com.cy or telephone the CAA on (00357) 22313233. For further information about Geroskipou, visit www.geroskipou-municipality.com

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**2009 Troodos Rally Press Office
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