

Sébastien Ogier was the pride of the plants on Friday at the Safari Rally Kenya as he recovered from a minor morning setback to build a commanding overnight lead.

The Frenchman showed his rivals a clean pair of heels on the opening day of action and had established a double-digit lead just three special stages into this seventh round of the FIA World Rally Championship.

A hybrid unit fault hindered the eight-time world champion late in the morning, however, slicing his buffer to just 2.5sec over team-mate Kalle Rovanperä before the midday service in Naivasha.

But that failed to deter Ogier, who gambled by carrying only one spare wheel aboard his Toyota GR Yaris for the repeated afternoon loop. Those weight-saving tactics clearly worked wonders as he romped to a hat-trick of benchmark stage times, ending the day 22.8sec clear of Rovanperä at the sharp end of a Toyota 1-2-3.

“It’s been a good day. Except for the hybrid issue this morning we had a perfect day, so we can be happy,” he said.

Championship leader Rovanperä found understeer an issue particularly over the second half of the day, the road-opening Finn forced to pave a new line in the rutted sandy tracks. His colleague Elfyn Evans completed the early podium 20.7sec behind on a day which the Welshman admitted he approached too cautiously.

Thierry Neuville had been Hyundai’s leading light for much of the day but the Belgian retired in the penultimate test when a heavy compression destroyed the front-left suspension on his i20 N. Safari debutant Esapekka Lappi, driving a similar car, inherited the position and trailed Evans by 10.5sec at close of play, passing Takamoto Katsuta in the process.

Katsuta donned his mechanics gloves after SS3 to replace a damaged steering arm on his Toyota. He heads sixth-placed Hyundai man Dani Sordo by just 9.0sec approaching Saturday after a dramatic finale saw him clip a tree branch and also sustain tyre damage.

M-Sport Ford drivers Ott Tänak and Pierre-Louis Loubet had a day to forget. Both lay several minutes back from the lead in seventh and eighth overall after carrying out mid-stage wheel changes, although their second-tier colleague Grégoire Munster

gave the British team something to smile about by leading the WRC2 category from Kajetan Kajetanowicz in a Fiesta Rally2.

Roads further north around Lake Elmenteita host Saturday's monster 150.88km route, the longest of the weekend.