

CUBA

By a Special Contributor

Sherritt International expects its Moa mine in Cuba to increase production this year by some 50%. Now that a new thickener is up and running at capacity, output should be some 21,000 t of nickel and cobalt in mixed sulphides, against the 14,760 t produced in 2000. Most recently, Sherritt's chief operating officer, Fred Wellhouser, stated that the company expects to maintain an above-capacity 31,000 t/y production rate at Moa. Design capacity is 24,000 t/y. Production and refining continues to go well and remains above expected levels, he said. Head grade is 1.4% Ni and "comparative" for cobalt, he added.

Output in the first quarter of 2001, at 7,769 t of nickel and cobalt contained in mixed sulphides was a production record for the sixth consecutive quarter. The figure was up 8% from the 7,193 t in the same period of 2000. Total finished nickel production was 6,809 t in 2001's first quarter, cobalt output totalled 712 t.

Moa has been operating for 43 years, but since Sherritt formed a partnership with owners, the Cuban state, in 1994, efficiency gains and other improvements have taken production some 30% beyond capacity. Sherritt's equity share of production is 50%.

Late in 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin presented Cuban authorities with a US\$300 million plan to build a mine. It was to be one of several investment projects between the two countries and would have involved setting up a joint-venture company.

The Russian leader and Cuban President Fidel Castro were also expected to agree on plans to revive Cuba's Juragua nuclear plant which has been out of service since 1992.

However, Cuba's Basic Industry Minister, Marcos Portal, says that the unfinished lateritic nickel-cobalt project at Las Camariocas will not be completed, despite an offer from Norilsk Nickel to provide funding. The resources at Las Camariocas will be exploited by one of the island's three existing plants, since the equipment installed to date at Las Camariocas is outdated and inefficient. The project was originally developed during the 1980s by a consortium from the Soviet Union, but when the collapse of communism occurred in 1989, all work stopped.

Cuba was of course the first user of pressure acid leaching, first developed in the late 1950s and used at Moa Bay in Cuba. In the 1970s, the Caron ammonia-leach process was developed and provided a market for limonitic ore. That process is still used extensively today in Cuba at Punta Gorda and Nicaro.

Last year, Miramar Mining granted an unnamed stockbroker the right to acquire 42.4 million of its 55.5 million shares in Northern Orion Explorations, Miramar's 75%-owned exploration subsidiary, plus certain other securities in Northern Orion for C\$8.4 million. Miramar retains 13.1 million shares in Northern Orion (17.6%), plus a C\$800,000 two-year note and royalty interests in future production from its properties, notably copper projects in Cuba.