



Major refugee overhaul urged

By **CLAIRE HARVEY**

MANDATORY detention of asylum seekers must be scrapped, says Peter Mitchell, a former immigration official central to the Howard government's hardline detainee policy.

Mr Mitchell, who ran Villawood detention centre from 1996-2001, spoke out for the first time yesterday. He said detainees were kept in "inhumane" conditions in a system that totally failed to deter boat arrivals.

Mr Mitchell's autobiography, *Compassionate Bastard*, is to be launched tomorrow.

Among Mr Mitchell's revelations:

- Immigration staff deeply frustrated at the delays that force desperate detainees to spend years behind razor-wire.

- The lifelong trauma suffered by asylum seeker children in detention when fellow detainees self-harmed or committed suicide.



UNDER FIRE: The Villawood detention centre.

- The "cowboy" world of immigration compliance teams in the 1990s, raiding homes and crash-tackling overstayers with no training.
- A Kosovar family refused to stay

in a Singleton barracks during Operation Safe Haven in 1999. The matter became a test of wills between the Salihu family and then Prime Minister John Howard, who Mr Mitchell says was directing officials to take a tough line.

"I just don't think mandatory detention works," said Mr Mitchell, who worked for the Department of Immigration from 1990-2002, including five years running Villawood detention centre when its population exploded from 80 to 750 detainees.

"There needs to be a legitimate assessment of people, but you don't need to keep locking people up," he said.

He said the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was right to end the Howard government's Pacific solution of offshore processing in Nauru, but added the debate was now "tougher than ever" because Mr Rudd's election coincided with a fresh wave of boats.