

Retail sales drop 0.9 percent

By Jeannine Aversa
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Sales at the nation's retailers dropped by 0.9 percent in January, largely reflecting a sharp decline in car and truck sales as consumers took a breather after going on an automobile shopping spree.

The Commerce Department reported Thursday that the 0.9 percent over-the-month decline in retail sales followed a 2 percent rise in December. That represented the biggest drop in four months and a weaker performance than the 0.6 percent drop that analysts were predicting.

Excluding automobile sales, retail sales actually rose by 1.3 percent in January, the biggest gain since September 2000. That marked an improvement over the small 0.2 percent advance in December and much stronger than the 0.5 percent rise economists were expecting.

That provided encouraging news; other than the big drop in automobile sales, which was expected, consumers showed considerable energy in January.

Separately, the Labor Department reported that new claims for unemployment benefits last week dropped by 18,000 to 377,000, a four-week low. The report suggested that the pace of layoffs is stabilizing, welcome news for workers worried about keeping their jobs.

On Wall Street, stocks sagged on the mixed economic news and war worries. The Dow Jones industrial average lost 60 points and the Nasdaq index was down six points in the first hour of trading.

Sales at automobile dealers declined by 7.5 percent in January, the biggest drop

since November 2001, as consumers became tapped out after a buying binge in December, when auto sales jumped 7.9 percent.

That was the major weak spot in Thursday's retail report.

Sales at building and garden supply stores rose 2.9 percent in January, following a 1.2 percent decline.

At department and other general merchandise stores, sales rose 0.6 percent, up from a 0.4 percent increase.

At health and beauty stores, sales went up 1.1 percent, better than the 0.2 percent decrease in December.

Sales of sporting goods, books and music rose 0.3 percent in January, a turnaround from the 0.9 percent drop the month before.

Food and beverage stores saw sales rise 2.6 percent last month, following a 1.3 percent decline.

At bars and restaurants, sales rose 1.1 percent, down from a 2 percent advance.

The Federal Reserve last month decided to leave a key interest rate at a 41-year low of 1.25 percent, with the hope that will encourage consumers and businesses to spend and invest more and help along the recovery.

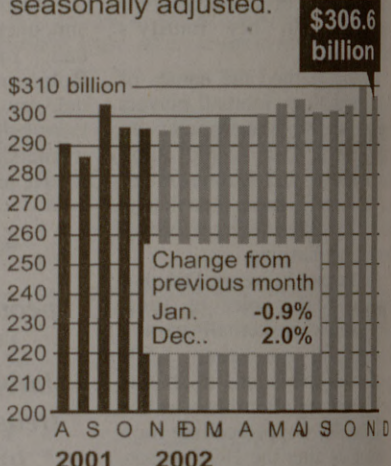
One of the main forces holding back the recovery is the wariness of businesses to make big commitments in hiring and in capital spending, given worries about a possible war with Iraq, tensions with North Korea and other economic uncertainties.

Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan told Congress this week that he was hopeful that once such "geopolitical" uncertainties lift businesses would be much more willing to step up capital investment and hiring, forces that would boost economic growth.

Against that backdrop, Greenspan said

Retail sales

Here is a look at retail sales, seasonally adjusted.



SOURCE: Department of Commerce AP

that President Bush's new 10-year, \$1.3 trillion tax-cut package isn't needed right now to stimulate the economy, dealing a blow to the president's efforts to sell the plan to Congress.

In the face of projections for record high federal budget deficits this year and next, Greenspan also said that any new tax cuts should be paid for by either raising other taxes or cutting spending, a position that clashes with the administration's.

Greenspan said that if geopolitical uncertainties do lift and businesses remain reluctant to quicken their operating pace then other monetary or fiscal policy actions may be warranted.

Jury convicts Harris of murder

By Pam Easton
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON — A woman who ran down her cheating husband with her Mercedes after catching him with his mistress was convicted of murder Thursday despite her claim it was all a tragic accident.

Clara Harris, 45, could get a life sentence, or a lesser punishment if the jury concludes she acted with "sudden passion." Two jurors wept as the judge returned the verdict against the mother of young twins.

Harris showed no emotion as she listened to the verdict. Free on bond until then, she was held in a cell during the lunch break as the punishment phase began shortly after her conviction.

During punishment testimony, she burst into sobs as her 17-year-old stepdaughter told how she had attempted suicide four

times since her father's death July 24. The teenager was a passenger in the Mercedes that day.

"I'm sorry, Lindsey! I'm sorry, baby!" Harris cried, prompting the judge to admonish her to compose herself.

During brief opening remarks to his punishment case, defense attorney George Parnham began his push for probation.

"She has been a law-abiding citizen throughout her life," Parnham told jurors. "She as a result of this verdict will no longer have a dental practice. She is an excellent candidate for community supervision."

Parnham again called the victim's father, Gerald Harris, to testify on his daughter-in-law's behalf.

"We feel like a member of our family has erred and we forgive that. We don't feel like Clara intended to kill David."

— Gerald Harris
victim's father

"Our motivation stems from the word forgiveness," Gerald Harris testified. "This tragedy was a very strong blow against our family. ... We feel like a member of our family has erred and we forgive that. We don't feel like Clara intended to kill David."

Harris, who shared a practice with her orthodontist husband, insisted David Harris' death in a hotel parking lot was an accident. She said that she was in a daze and wanted only to damage the black

Lincoln Navigator belonging to her husband's receptionist-turned-lover, Gail Bridges.

"I think I closed my eyes," Harris testified. "After that, I didn't know who was driving. Everything seemed like a dream."

Defense experts said the Mercedes' turning radius and other evidence indicated she hit him only once. Her lawyers also branded Bridges a "home wrecker," while David Harris' parents testified in support of their daughter-in-law and said the couple's marriage was "made in heaven."

But prosecutors said witnesses' accounts, bloodstains on the underside of the car and tire tracks on the body all showed she ran him over at least twice. A grainy videotape recorded by a private investigator Clara Harris had hired to follow Bridges shows the Mercedes circling the lot repeatedly.

Striking police return to work in Bolivia

By Graham Gori
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LA PAZ, Bolivia — Striking police officers returned to work Thursday after two days of violent street protests that left 22 people dead and a trail of burned and looted buildings throughout the capital of South America's poorest nation.

People lined the streets of La Paz to cheer police officers as they began to restore order after demonstrators set fire to government buildings and looted stores in a wave of violence that began as a protest against a new income tax that the government suspended to calm the unrest.

Over the two days, 22 people were killed, including at least nine police officers, and 102 were injured, according to Eduardo Chavez, director of La Paz's General Hospital, where most of the casualties were treated.

Earlier Thursday, sirens wailed and bands of looters ran through chaotic central La Paz, where tanks and 400 heavily armed soldiers were deployed near the presidential palace, which was besieged by protesters a day earlier.

Several thousand protesters marched through downtown, shouting slogans against President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. "Resign or die, those

are your options," they chanted. The march, organized by labor groups, ended without violence.

Elsewhere, troops fired tear gas and rubber bullets at groups of looters breaking into shops and buildings. Five people were injured by rubber bullets, the Red Cross said.

Looters scoured the Ministry of Sustainable Development, one of a dozen government buildings torched Wednesday. The thieves threw chairs and papers out the windows while a crowd of 300 people cheered them outside.

"There were great things inside, computers, radios, but they beat me two it," said one looter, holding a metal trophy he'd managed to snatch.

La Paz fell into chaos Wednesday after most of the city's 7,000 police walked off their posts and led protests that degenerated into the violent riots.

After talks with the government, the police slowly trickled out of their barracks and resumed patrols.

In a metropolitan area of about 1.5 million, public transportation came to a halt and shop owners covered windows with plywood and metal.

Police officers spent most of Thursday with family members, attending funeral services for nine officers who died in Wednesday's clashes.

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