

Consumers fueled 3.1% growth last year in U.S.

Robust GDP figures arrive as inflation dips below Fed’s 2% goal

BY ABHA BHATTARAI

The U.S. economy grew by a bustling 3.1 percent in 2023, shaking off recession fears and offering an upbeat picture of consumers and businesses ahead of a pivotal election year.

Gross domestic product grew even faster than many had anticipated in the last three months of the year — by an annual rate of 3.3 percent, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis — offering fresh evidence that federal policymakers have managed to bring down inflation and secure a “soft landing” without major repercussions for workers or the economy.

“It’s just a perfect report: strong growth and low inflation,” said Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody’s Analytics. “Everything contributed to growth: consumers, businesses, government, housing, trade, inventories. All of the economic wheels were moving in the same direction.”

Vigorous consumer spending has driven the economy’s resilience over the past year. A strong job market and rising wages have made it possible for many households to keep shelling out — particularly on services such as hotels, travel and dining out — even at a time of elevated inflation.

That spending by everyday Americans accounted for most of the economy’s growth in the fourth quarter. Increased government spending, at the state, local

SEE GDP ON A16

Spending: Bank account balances stable after shock of inflation. **A11**

Senate GOP struggles to preserve border deal

Trump pushes to maintain campaign issue, holding up Ukraine aid

BY LIZ GOODWIN AND LEIGH ANN CALDWELL

Senate Republicans struggled to hold together support for a bipartisan border-for-Ukraine deal on Thursday as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) privately acknowledged former president Donald Trump’s opposition to the deal has complicated its future.

Republicans demanded stringent border policy changes to pass \$60 billion in Ukraine aid requested by the White House last year, and a small group of Senate negotiators are closing in on a deal that Trump has publicly slammed and that some Republicans have argued could hurt Trump’s reelection chances by removing a potent campaign issue. A significant number of Republican senators have begun to speak out against the border security deal before its details have been released and even as they continue to raise alarm bells about the migrant

SEE BORDER ON A4

Air defenses are overwhelmed in Ukraine’s second-largest city



PHOTOS BY ALICE MARTINS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

In Kharkiv, little letup in rain of Russian missiles

BY SIOBHÁN O’GRADY AND SERHII KOROLCHUK NORTH OF KHARKIV, UKRAINE

The 59-year-old air defense unit soldier had just started his shift in a patch of snowy woods near the Russian border early Tuesday when a bright light blazed across the horizon.

He grabbed his radio and barked an urgent message: “I see flashes and hear outgoing booms!”

The soldier knew they were ballistic missiles, launched from inside Russia. But there was no time to stop them — and no weapon in his unit’s arsenal that could.

Seconds later, the missiles crashed into Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city, flattening

a residential building and destroying other civilian infrastructure. Ten people, including a child, were killed, and dozens of others were wounded. Some victims were trapped for hours under the rubble.

“I understood they would fly and hit people, and that I couldn’t do anything to prevent it from happening,” said the soldier, who spoke on the condition that he be identified by his call sign, Grandpa, in keeping with military rules. The pain of that helplessness, he said, was a feeling he “couldn’t express in words.”

Russia hit Kharkiv, which sits just 19 miles

SEE DEFENSE ON A10

FROM TOP: Rescuers search for survivors after a missile strike destroyed a residential building Tuesday in Kharkiv, Ukraine, which sits just 19 miles south of the border. A member of a Ukrainian air defense unit watches the sky this week in the woods north of Kharkiv.

Biden to send CIA director to help broker Gaza deal

BURNS TO MEET KEY PARTIES, OFFICIALS SAY

Release of all hostages, two-month cease-fire sought

BY JOHN HUDSON AND CLAIRE PARKER

President Biden plans to dispatch CIA Director William J. Burns in the coming days to help broker an ambitious deal between Hamas and Israel that would involve the release of all remaining hostages held in Gaza and the longest cessation of hostilities since the war began last year, according to officials familiar with the matter.

Burns is expected to travel to Europe for the talks and meet with the Israeli and Egyptian intelligence chiefs, David Barnea and Abbas Kamel, and Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, these people said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss

sensitive negotiations. The planned gathering has not been previously reported.

Egypt and Qatar have been key interlocutors between Israel and Hamas, the militant group whose deadly cross-border attack on Oct. 7 set off the war in Gaza. The two countries helped secure an initial pause in hostilities and hostage release in November. But tensions between the Israelis and Qataris are on a razor’s edge after leaked audio of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu captured the Israeli leader disparaging Qatar in a conversation with Israeli hostage families.

Burns’s discussions in Europe are expected to build on his phone conversations with counterparts, as well as the work of the

SEE GAZA ON A8

Amid war, a daily ordeal to fend off starvation

Half-million people face ‘famine by February,’ world food agency warns

BY MIRIAM BERGER, HAJAR HARB AND LOAY AYYOUB

JERUSALEM — Each day, for four days, Mohammad waited in line for a few pounds of flour. Returning home empty-handed to his five children, pained by hunger and humiliation, he ground up animal feed to bake over a makeshift stove.

“We don’t know how dangerous eating animal feed is to our health, but we have no other options,” the 40-year-old said by phone from Beit Lahia, in Gaza’s north.

“If the situation continues, you may see people dying [of hunger] in the streets,” said Mohammad, who worked as a driver before the war. Like others in this story, he spoke on the condition he be identified only by his first name, fearing retaliation from Israeli forces.

The Washington Post spoke to six families across Gaza about their daily struggle for food. Ninety-three percent of people there face “crisis levels of hunger,” according to a report published in late December by a U.N.-backed international consortium. More than half a million people — a quarter of the enclave’s blockaded and bombarded population — face “catastrophic hunger and starvation,” the report said.

SEE HUNGER ON A8

CDC support: Political concerns at WHO delayed experts’ dispatch. **A9**



LOAY AYYOUB FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Shahinaz Nofal and a young relative eat pasta Sunday inside a camp housing displaced people south of Rafah.

Alabama puts prisoner to death in first nitrogen gas execution

BY KIM BELLWARE AND ANN E. MARIMOW

ATMORE, ALA. — Alabama carried out the world’s first known execution by nitrogen hypoxia Thursday. The unprecedented method was administered to Kenneth Eugene Smith, a prisoner on death row for his role in a contract killing more than three decades ago.

Smith’s execution was preceded

ed by months of legal battles over whether it was constitutional to use nitrogen hypoxia in capital punishment, as the method was not known to have ever been used before in a prison setting. Alabama prison officials kept many of the details about how they would carry out the new method a secret from the public.

Smith, 58, was pronounced dead at 8:25 p.m. at the William

C. Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore.

Media witnesses arrived to the death chamber and saw Smith strapped to a gurney and fitted with a mask that covered his entire face.

“Tonight, Alabama caused humanity to take a step backward,” Smith said in a lengthy final statement transcribed by media witnesses. “I’m leaving with love, peace and light. Thank you for

supporting me. Love all of you.”

Using sign language, Smith said, “I love you,” directing the sign toward the window of the viewing room where his family sat.

Smith appeared conscious for at least two minutes while the gas flowed to his mask, according to media witnesses. He shook and writhed for at least two minutes on the gurney, and this was followed by two minutes of

deep breaths and then a period of time during which media witnesses were unable to determine if he was breathing.

The curtain closed at 8:15 p.m., 10 minutes before the state pronounced him dead.

Speaking to reporters after the execution, Alabama Department of Corrections Commissioner John Q. Hamm called Smith’s shaking and writhing

SEE EXECUTION ON A6

IN THE NEWS

Much-anticipated testimony Donald Trump took the witness stand in the defamation damages case brought by E. Jean Carroll. **A5**

Wizards make a change Mired in a rocky rebuild that has the team at the bottom of the NBA standings, the team’s leadership has removed Wes Unseld Jr. as coach. **D1**

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THE REGION
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D.C. paramedics will soon be able to give blood transfusions to patients before they reach a hospital. **B1**

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